

COBALT-SERIES

マリア様がみたる

クリスクロス

今野緒雪

Prologue

"Gokigenyou."

"Gokigenyou."

The clear morning greeting travels through the serene, blue sky.

Today, once again, the maidens that gather in the Virgin Mary's garden smile purely to one another as they pass under the tall gateway.

Wrapping their innocent bodies and souls is a deep-colored school uniform.

Walking slowly so as to not disturb the pleats in their skirts, so as to not toss their white sailor scarves into disarray... such is the standard of modesty here. Running here because one is in danger of missing class, for instance, is too undignified a sight for students to wish upon themselves.

Lillian Private Academy for Women.

Founded in Meiji 34, this academy was originally intended for the young women of nobility, and is now a Catholic academy of prestigious tradition. Placed in downtown Tokyo, where you can still see traces of Musashi Field's greenery, it is protected by God, a garden where maidens can receive tutelage from preschool to university.

Time passes, and even now, in Heisei, three era-names past Meiji, it is a valuable academy, where nurtured ladies raised in greenhouses are shipped out in carefully packaged boxes after 18 years of schooling - an arrangement that continues to survive.

Hiding the treasure for a treasure hunt.

It's a bit exciting, then nerve-wracking.

You sort of want it to be found quickly, but you don't really want it to be discovered easily.

On top of those conflicting feelings, there's also a layer of, "I hope the searchers have a good time," as you head out.

The first thing to do is open a map and put an X through the hiding place.

The Valentine's Day event is about to begin.

Criss-cross

Good Morning Chocolate

Part 1

She knew she could be a bit forgetful.

But the fourteenth of February, the day of the newspaper club's "Future Roses' Treasure Hunt," was also the nationwide celebration, Valentine's Day.

So even though she went to school a fair bit earlier than usual, the bus and the school grounds were surprisingly full of students, causing Yumi to groan.

She'd been expecting it, but not this much.

It was particularly busy at the fork in the path by the Maria-sama statue, with groups of sœurs on standby, waiting for breaks in the flow of students saying their morning prayers, then approaching the statue one group at a time to exchange chocolates.

With that many students around the school, there was no way she'd be able to hide her card in the morning and let it rest until after school. The swift rejection of this idea at their earlier planning meeting had been correct.

Even so, Yumi thought it was amazing that her onee-sama, Ogasawara Sachiko-sama, had done just that last year. How early did she have to arrive at school?

Opening the door of her locker, Yumi saw a small light-brown bundle with a red ribbon around it, and a cute pink floral paper bag quietly sitting there.

"..."

Her initial reaction was that she'd mistakenly opened someone else's shoe locker, so she hurriedly closed the door. But for the last ten months, she'd been coming to this same spot day after day, so she should have been able to find her own locker without checking the nametag for confirmation. So how had this happened today?

For the time being, Yumi hid her embarrassment by scratching her head. Luckily, there weren't that many students around, so hiding her embarrassment wasn't actually necessary.

Setting that aside, she read the nametag on the shoe locker door.

"Huh? It says 'Fukuzawa'."

And there was only one Fukuzawa-san in the second-year Pine class.

"So that means...."

Naturally, she made the very Fukuzawa Yumi-esque assumption that whoever placed the package and paper bag in there had made a mistake, and wondered what she should do with this lost property.

But then.

"Oh my, you're so popular, Yumi-san."

Yumi turned around when she heard this and found Katsura-san from Wisteria class standing there, grinning as she peeked into Yumi's shoe locker.

"Huh!?"

"Why are you so surprised? Today's Valentine's Day, right?"

Katsura-san pulled a box about the size of two stacked CD cases out of her bag and said, "right?" Presumably, they were chocolates she was going to give to her onee-sama in the tennis club.

"So you're saying...?"

That they were both equivalent.

"They're chocolates, for you, Yumi-san."

Yumi hesitated, so Katsura-san reached past her and took the parcel and paper bag out of Yumi's locker and presented them to her, saying, "See."

Indeed. Whether it was because they understood the personality of that shoe-

locker's owner or not, both gifts were clearly labeled with the recipient's name: "Fukuzawa Yumi-sama."

She'd been beaten. Yumi cooled her feverish brow with the back of her hand.

"... I never imagined this sort of thing could happen."

Even though she gave out chocolates on Valentine's Day, she never expected to receive any. And, apologies to the senders, but Yumi couldn't recall who they were, even though she'd seen their names.

"Ah, you're still the same natural airhead, Yumi-san."

Katsura-san murmured in astonishment.

"Well, I mean, I don't have a petite sœur."

"What are you muttering about? Valentine's Day isn't just for giving chocolates to your sœur. You saw that last year, right?"

"Ah, yeah."

She had indeed seen it. The oversized paper bag full of chocolates, given to Rei-sama by way of her petite sœur Yoshino-san, and Sachiko-sama's refusal of chocolates from everyone except Yumi. On top of that, there was a certain unnamed graduate who had pestered people other than her petite sœur for "Chocolates, please."

But, to think that it could happen to her.

"Anyway, well, good luck."

After patting Yumi on the shoulder, Katsura-san disappeared towards the classroom at a jog, having already changed into her indoor shoes.

As for Yumi, who'd been left behind ... she took off her outdoor shoes, put the (presumably chocolate) gifts into her bag, changed into her indoor shoes, and closed her locker door.

As she walked down the hallway, she thought about what to do with the

chocolates.

"Good luck, huh."

If she was going to follow in the footsteps of her beloved onee-sama, then she couldn't accept them. Having said that, she didn't think she had the courage or conviction to send them back.

Naturally, she was happy to receive chocolates as an expression of someone's good will towards her. She wanted to gratefully accept those feelings.

Although, by accepting them, she would have to provide a return gift on White Day. And while it was obviously a pointless concern, what would she do in the incredibly unlikely event that she ended up with a haul like Rei-sama last year? Such were her concerns; even as she was soaring with joy, another part of her was applying the brakes.

"I see. So that's something else I'll need 'good luck' for."

Even though there were already so many things she had to do today.

The number of pressing concerns she had just increased by one.

Part 2

The second-year Pine classroom was filled with a sweet smell.

That wasn't a metaphor; it really was the smell of chocolate.

There were chocolates, both still-to-be-given and already-received, in the desks, in the bags, and in the lockers. Of course, that's not to ignore those girls secretly snacking on chocolates they'd made for taste-testing, or just happened to make too much.

Students entering their regular old classroom were met by this unusual aroma, reinforcing the fact that, "Ahh, it's Valentine's Day." But that was only at the beginning. Soon enough, they became accustomed to it and didn't notice the smell.

Yumi left her coat and school bag in the classroom and headed out with only her handbag. After a little bit of indecision, she decided to leave the chocolates from her shoe locker in her class locker.

After that she headed towards her onee-sama, so she could give her chocolates. It would have been a mistake to take easily confused packages with her. Yumi hadn't forgotten last year's debacle.

There were a couple of students standing outside the third-year Pine classroom, as though they were waiting for someone.

(What if they're all here to give chocolates to my onee-sama?)

Knowing what happened last year and the year before, only masochistic second and third-years would be so reckless as to think of giving Sachiko-sama chocolates. But the first-years wouldn't know.

It wasn't as though Yumi was jealous, but she didn't want to witness any other students giving Sachiko-sama chocolates. Since not only would they be turned

down, they probably wouldn't want her petite sœur to see that either.

But those worries were unfounded. Watching from a safe distance, Yumi saw the waiting girls give their chocolates to other third-years, one by one, and then leave.

"Oh, it's Fukuzawa Yumi-chan."

One of the third-years called out to her, after receiving their chocolates.

"Sachiko-san's already here."

"Oh, is that so?"

"Should I get her for you?"

"Please."

"Oka~y."

The girl grinned as she went back into the classroom.

Yumi had been loitering outside her onee-sama's classroom on the morning of February 14. It was pretty obvious why she was there.

"Yumi."

Before long, Sachiko-sama appeared in the hallway.

"Gokigenyou, onee-sama."

She was as beautiful as ever. The dry winter air was having no effect on her at all. Her skin was smooth and her hair was silky.

"Gokigenyou."

"Um."

Yumi was about to pull the chocolates out of her handbag when Sachiko-sama stopped her with a "Wait."

"Let's go some place else."

"Huh?"

"Don't worry."

Sachiko-sama walked off down the hallway, holding Yumi's hand. Yumi had thought she'd just hand over the chocolates and then quickly leave, but now she was thinking that perhaps she should have chosen a more suitable location.

"You may not have noticed, but some of my classmates had come out of the classroom in order to satisfy their curiosity."

"Ah."

"Plus, there were so many people around, I couldn't relax."

But it went without saying that today was Valentine's Day. There would already be people at any of the places Yumi could think of.

"It feels like it's overcapacity everywhere we go."

Of course, in comparison to the trains during rush hour, it was quite empty. Even so, it was hard to ensure there was an adequate separation from other people. It would be inexcusable to have their arrival intrude upon other people that were exchanging chocolates too.

The Rose Mansion came in handy at times like these, but Sachiko-sama seemed to be avoiding it, perhaps because it was being used as the treasure hunt's headquarters. It wasn't as though outsiders were forbidden from entering the Rose Mansion, but Yumi understood that feeling since she'd found it hard to step inside during last year's event too.

In the end, Sachiko-sama finally stopped walking when they were around the back of the Rose Mansion.

"Why were your classmates spying on you, onee-sama?"

Yumi asked the question that she'd been pondering for the entire time they'd been walking. Since there shouldn't be anything that unusual about the Red Rose

sœurs being together at this point.

"Last year, I rejected everyone's chocolates except yours, right? They wanted to see my expression —"

"Your expression when you accepted my chocolates? Please show that only to me."

Yumi removed a red package from her handbag and held it out to her onee-sama.

"... Is that a demand?"

Sachiko-sama smiled shyly.



"Not at all."

Yumi shook her head, and Sachiko-sama accepted the chocolates with a "Thank you." Then she boldly unfastened the silver ribbon and opened the package.

"Oh my."

What she saw were ten home-made chocolate truffles, each about the size of a pickled plum.

"Are these ... surprise chocolates?"

Sachiko-sama inquired, their appearance sparking a memory. That was the name Yumi had hastily made up last year, partly out of desperation and partly to cover her embarrassment at the accident. But this year.

"Version two."

"Version two?"

"You'll be surprised how much love is mixed in."

"Hehehe."

Sachiko-sama took one of the chocolates and put it in her mouth.

"It's true."

"Right?"

They looked into each other's eyes and laughed. Such bliss.

"Well then, this is from me."

It was only now that Yumi realized Sachiko-sama was still carrying her handbag, as a small package emerged like magic.

"Wait, are you telling me those are chocolates?"

The package was wrapped in green wrapping paper with dark brown lines and tied with a yellow ribbon.

"Wouldn't that be the most likely conclusion, when receiving a gift on a day like today?"

"I suppose ... but I wasn't really expecting this either."

"Either?"

"Ah, never mind that."

Back on topic, while she gave her onee-sama chocolates, she never expected to receive any either. Of course, she knew that different sœurs had different approaches – like Rei-sama and Yoshino-san's tradition. She knew that, but she still couldn't imagine her onee-sama, Ogasawara Sachiko-sama, making chocolates.

"Last year, I was so happy when you gave me chocolates. So I thought I'd do the same this year."

Then she added, "I wanted to convey my feelings."

"Onee-sama...."

This was probably why she had wanted to escape the gaze of her classmates. Sachiko-sama was famous for refusing any chocolates given to her, so for her to give chocolates in return would undoubtedly cause an uproar.

"Thank-you very much."

Accepting both the chocolates and Sachiko-sama's feelings, Yumi clasped them to her chest.

"Although I'm afraid they're only store-bought chocolates. I wasn't confident I could make chocolates like you did, but they're still quite good."

Apparently these chocolates had her onee-sama's seal of approval.

"I've got an emotional attachment to those chocolates."

Sachiko-sama said, pointing.

"When I was in kindergarten, I received a box of these chocolates from a

classmate on the day she moved away. I've since forgotten that girl's name and face, but I never forgot the taste of those chocolates. As a result, every so often I find myself searching them out."

It was unusual for Sachiko-sama to be reminiscing about her barely remembered time in kindergarten. This episode with her classmate must have left a large impression on her.

"I even looked after the wrapping paper it came in, ironing it out."

"Is this it?"

Yumi asked, looking at the green and dark-brown lined paper.

"No."

The current wrapping paper was Valentine's Day specific, so wouldn't typically be used for an everyday gift. But even if it were just a normal gift, the wrapping paper designs would have changed somewhat over the decade between then and now.

"But the taste should be the same. Try one of them."

At Sachiko-sama's urging, Yumi carefully undid the paper so as not to tear it, opened the box, and ate one of the chocolates.

"It's good."

The taste of Sachiko-sama's memories. They offered each other one of the chocolates they'd received, and also put one of the chocolates they'd brought from home into their mouths. Then they both smiled simultaneously. At that moment, the two flavors were mixing, filling their mouths.

As Sachiko-sama took her second chocolate from the box, and third in total, she quietly asked Yumi:

"Did you make these just for me?"

"Huh?"

"Last year, you gave some to Sei-sama too, didn't you?"

"Ah —"

It seemed like she was asking whether Yumi had made chocolates for anyone else.

"They're just for you. That's why they're so full of love."

"A surprising amount."

"Yeah."

Yumi understood that her onnee-sama wasn't jealous, she just wanted confirmation. While Yumi hadn't been consciously aware of it at first, now that she'd been asked and had to put it into words, her feelings crystallized.

"I thought I'd keep some distance from Touko-chan for the time being."

"I see."

"There seems to have been some sort of misunderstanding. I want to give Touko-chan some time to compose herself, because it will just deteriorate even further if she's not willing to listen to what I have to say."

"That sounds about right."

After agreeing, Sachiko-sama ate another chocolate truffle.

"It really is a shame, there's so much love in these."

She said.

Part 3

After that they parted company, and Yumi went into the Rose Mansion by herself.

Yumi had explained that it wouldn't matter if she came inside, but Sachiko-sama still refrained. She may have been worried about causing a needless misunderstanding by being too close to the headquarters when she was a participant in the treasure hunt.

There were already benefits to being the *sœur* of a host. Even though they wouldn't be leaked all the details, Yumi could understand why some people might mistakenly believe that. In reality, knowing their personality and preferences probably made it easier to reason where they would hide their card.

Yumi considered this as she opened the door.

It was probably for this reason that Sachiko-sama had left so quickly after their exchange of chocolates.

The other participants wouldn't begrudge *sœurs* exchanging chocolates on Valentine's Day, no matter the circumstances. This brief interlude did not require them to be in the Rose Mansion; neither Sachiko-sama nor Rei-sama.

But, drawing a clear distinction between those two events, Sachiko-sama was full of enthusiasm for the treasure hunt. However, Yumi couldn't imagine her running around with the crowd, checking every nook and cranny.

As Yumi put her hand on the handrail and was about to climb the stairs, she caught a voice seeping out of the room on the ground floor.

(Is that Yoshino-san and the others...?)

She removed her foot from the first step and turned towards the room. A while ago, they had discussed tidying it up prior to the treasure hunt, but had been so

busy that it hadn't happened yet.

As a result, Yumi casually opened the door, like, "I'll help with the cleanup too."

"Gokige – "

But, the next instant, she was surprised by the scene in front of her and instinctively slammed the door closed.

"Pardon me!"

Wah wah wah. What was that just now? That dazzling scene had blinded her.

"Yumi-san?"

Shimako-san called out from the other side of the closed door.

"I'm sorry."

She'd seen something she shouldn't have.

"What are you apologizing for?"

Yumi was leaning with her back against the door as it slowly opened.

"Well, you're exchanging chocolates, right?"

"That's true, but it's not really a problem if someone else sees that. If we didn't want to be seen, we would have gone somewhere where no-one would find us, so it's okay."

She'd said it was okay, but even so.

"That reaction was like a middle-school boy who'd stumbled upon a group of girls getting changed."

After the grande sœur came the petite sœur. Noriko-chan likewise stepped out of the room as though nothing had happened. So, by majority rule, it looked as though it was Yumi's excessive reaction that was out of place.

"Oh, I don't think she'd be that surprised to see us getting changed. We were in

the same class in first-year, so we used to get changed for PE together."

It wasn't said as a joke, but that response was kind of absurd, Shimako-san.

But, in a sense, that scene was even more "private" than getting changed; the sœurs facing each other, with the chocolates between them. The atmosphere in the storage room sparkled brightly only in their immediate vicinity and, since it was somewhere unexpected for them to be, the White Rose sœurs looked almost like illusions.

It felt like they'd been in their own private world. And, as the name suggested, it was like no-one should intrude upon them.

At any rate, it was beautiful. Too beautiful. That vision of sœurs exchanging chocolates...!

After Yumi's thoughts had raced to this point, they came to a sudden stop as she thought: "Hold on."

From an objective perspective, did she and her onee-sama possibly project the same sort of atmosphere? To test this out, she tried imagining what their exchange of chocolates would have looked like, and her face flushed crimson.

"Yumi-san's – "

"Yeah, it's quite funny to see."

Whispering to each other as they studied her face. My, what an impolite pair of sœurs.

Then Yumi thought, "I wonder if the White Rose sœurs' chocolate is sweet and creamy," and Noriko-chan said, "It's just regular milk chocolate." Shimako-san said she made the same marble cake as last year.

Oh, so they also had the onee-sama giving the petite sœur chocolate too? – Apparently, this thought also showed up on her face.

"Sorry for flustering you like this, Yumi-san. We probably could have done it after school, but given what happened last year...."

Shimako-san giggled.

"Last year ... ah."

Yumi nodded, remembering those events. Then Noriko-chan immediately asked:

"What happened last year?"

No matter how close two sœurs are, they won't know everything about each other's past.

"Shimako-san hid the chocolates she was going to give to her onnee-sama ... ah, wait, it was cake wasn't it? Then, when the treasure hunt was over, it was nowhere to be found."

Yumi pointed to the storage room, indicating that the cake had been hidden in there.

"Wha—!?"

Bravo. She'd elicited the correct reaction from Noriko-chan.

"One of the treasure hunt participants had eaten it."

"But, but that's horrible ... although it's shocking that a student who could do such a thing would be at Lillian to begin with."

"Oh but there was such a student. Only one."

"Right."

Noriko-chan deduced what had happened from Yumi and Shimako-san's expressions and once more said, "That's horrible."

"I just can't believe it no matter how I try. That person was my onnee-sama's onnee-sama."

"Oh, but Sei-sama was amazing. She was popular with the younger grades too."

Yumi had a soft spot for Sei-sama, but even ignoring that, she had been held in high regard by the school.

"I get that she was amazing. And popular too. But there's such a disparity. I know I may be turning a blind eye to my own shortcomings, but how did someone like that get involved with Shimako-san?"

Noriko-chan hung her head, her expression showing a mixture of regret, disappointment, and incomprehension.

"You can't say anything about this to Shimako-san or Sachiko-sama."

Yumi stealthily whispered to Noriko-chan, as though she were really about to tell her a secret, but Noriko-chan perked up the moment she heard Shimako-san's name.

"What is it?"

Apparently that was her reaction upon hearing her beloved Shimako-san's name.

"Shimako-san rejected Sachiko-sama's rosary and chose Sei-sama."

"Wha- ... why? They seem way more fitting."

Straightforward Noriko-chan spoke her honest thoughts.

"Hey now, what about me then?"

Yumi faked a scowl at Noriko-chan.

"Ah."

Belatedly realizing what she'd said, Noriko-chan covered her mouth.

"I didn't mean to say that you weren't fitting for Rosa Chinensis."

It was fairly typical for someone who found themselves in deep trouble to try and squirm out of it like this. It was amusing to see the usually cool and collected Noriko-chan frantically try and justify herself, so Yumi thought about stringing her along further, but since they didn't really have the time right now she decided to let her off the hook.

Still climbing the stairs, Shimako-san laughed.

"Sei-sama would definitely cough at a time like this."

Her sweet voice melted those listening.

Part 4

"You're late."

When they got to the room on the second floor of the Rose Mansion, they were met with a scowl.

"Honestly."

Yoshino-san continued.

"The White and Red Rose families were all so busy this morning exchanging chocolates. But, sadly, the head of the Yellow Rose household is absent today with an entrance exam."

Yumi had a vague memory of this being the sort of line a wife would say when her husband was transferred to a distant city, leaving his family behind.

"Rei-sama's not coming?"

"We'll see. She said she wanted to come once her exam was over, but who knows? She's put an entry in the second-chance draw, so even if she comes she can't participate in the treasure hunt."

So that was it. Yoshino-san was more upset by Rei-sama's absence than she was about chocolates. Last year, the Yellow Rose sœurs – cousins and next-door neighbors – had exchanged chocolates after they got home from school.

"Relax, Yoshino-san. Everyone made it in time for the 8 o'clock meeting."

Mami-san, the president of the newspaper club and editor-in-chief of the Lillian Kawaraban, tried to pacify Yoshino-san. The eight members of the newspaper club had already arrived.

"I don't want to hear that from someone standing there with her sœur."

Mami-san's petite sœur, Hidemi-san, was a member of the newspaper club, so naturally she was also present.

"Oh? But we're not exchanging chocolates."

Mami-san responded immediately.

"You're not?"

Yoshino-san asked, arbitrarily deciding that all sœurs were required to exchange presents on Valentine's Day.

"The newspaper club's focusing all our energy on today's main event. We don't have any spare time for something frivolous like that. Right?"

Mami-san shifted her gaze to her petite sœur, looking for confirmation. But, no matter how long she waited, there was no response of "Yes," or "Of course," forthcoming from Hidemi-san.

"Um ... Hidemi-san, did you...?"

Noriko-chan timidly inquired. Then Hidemi-san angrily thrust a cute paper bag at Mami-san. It was undoubtedly a thrust, not just an offer.

"Hidem—"

"So sorry for spending my energy on something as frivolous as this when we don't have any spare time."

"No, it's not like that."

Mami-san was reeling from the unexpected attack. That pair had a relationship more like a boss-and-employee's, rather than sœurs. Mami-san probably didn't know how to cope with this situation, since she couldn't usually spoil or indulge her petite sœur.

(First of all, "thank you.")

Yumi moved around behind Mami-san and whispered in her ear.

"First of all, thank you."

"It's frivolous to say 'first of all'."

(I'm so happy.)

Shimako-san joined in too.

"I-I'm so happy."

She was just saying what she was told. Mami-san was acting like a ventriloquist's dummy.

"That's enough."

Hidemi-san turned her back, like she was sulking.

"My Onee-sama's the newspaper's ogre-in-chief; I wasn't really expecting much."

(An ogre, huh.)

Everyone considered this for a moment, but then:

"Exactly."

The previously deflated Mami-san straightened up and answered heartily.

"I'm the Lillian Kawaraban's ogre. I'm not about to loosen up and have fun even on Valentine's Day."

"Don't say that, Mami-san."

It was like she was verbally trampling all over the gift her petite sœur had gone to great efforts to give her.

"My mind is completely filled with today's event. Hidemi wouldn't be my petite sœur if she didn't understand something like that."

After saying this, Mami-san turned to her petite sœur.

"So? What's this?"

"Ch-chocolate cookies."

"I see. Then I'll eat them after the event, since I usually crave sweet things when I'm tired."

"Okay."

Hidemi-san responded cheerfully.

Wait, wait. Was that okay? Somehow it had all been resolved peacefully. It wasn't just Yumi – Yoshino-san, Shimako-san, Noriko-chan, and all the other newspaper club members were equally bewildered.

Sœurship was an unfathomable thing. Ten pairs would have ten different ways of doing things, same for one hundred, and none of them would have the same sort of relationship as another.

But it was probably those differences that made it so interesting.

"Well then, let's start our final briefing."

With Mami-san's declaration, everyone took their seats and adopted serious expressions.

"First of all, let's review everyone's movements against this timetable, and then
—"

Everyone was united in wanting this event to be a success.

Part 5

Arriving back at the second-year Pine classroom just before the bell, they passed the first-year Naitou Shouko-chan at the door.

(So that means ...)

"Welcome back, you three."

As expected, when they went inside they found Tsutako-san at the entry. Which meant that, undoubtedly, Shouko-chan had given Tsutako-san —

Yumi, Yoshino-san and Mami-san all shared a look and smiled knowingly. In her hand, Tsutako-san gripped a small light-brown gift bag, without a ribbon.

"Is that from Shouko-chan?"

"Uh ... yeah."

Tsutako-san answered, with an expression that was more bewildered than overjoyed.

"What's the matter? Isn't it chocolates?"

"Mm."

That answer could be taken as either it was chocolates, or it wasn't. Tsutako-san sighed as she returned to her seat, and curiosity compelled Yumi, Yoshino-san and Mami-san to follow her.

"Is it chocolates? Or not?"

"Aren't you happy?"

"Why are you looking like that?"

Crowding around both sides of Tsutako-san's desk, the trio asked this succession of questions. Sitting down in her seat, Tsutako-san set the paper bag in front of her, let out another deep sigh, then raised her head.

"You know...."

"Hm?"

"Even I thought that if she was going to give me something, that it would be chocolates."

"It's not?"

Well, if it wasn't chocolates, there were plenty of other things it could be – like Hidemi-san's cookies, or Shimako-san's marble cake. Of course, it didn't have to be sweets, it could be something like a handmade scarf or a bag. But the bag was a bit small for one of those.

"Is it something troubling?"

It seemed unlikely that Shouko-chan would give Tsutako-san something she didn't want, but Yumi thought she'd at least ask. Everyone had their own hobbies and preferences, after all.

For instance, what if Shouko-chan raised lizards, or giant spiders, and gave Tsutako-san one of those ... that would definitely be troubling.

But Tsutako-san rejected this.

"No, it's something I'm really happy to get."

"Then, what? Why that expression?"

Yoshino-san blurted out her question, irritated.

"I'm just worried."

"About?"

"If I get film as a present for Valentine's Day, what should I give as a return gift on White Day?"

"... Huh?"

Film on Valentine's Day.

That too.

They'd found another Valentine's Day option, unique and interesting.

Sentimental First-Year Camellia Class

Part 1

Normal.

In the first-year Camellia classroom, Rosa Gigantea en bouton was troubled.

"Gokigenyou."

This morning she had arrived at school a fair bit earlier than usual, and left only her bag in the classroom before heading out again to give Shimako-san her chocolates. So when the final review meeting was over and she returned to her classroom, she met most of her classmates for the first time that day. Naturally, she returned their greeting with a "Gokigenyou" as she took her seat, but it was only one of them – Matsudaira Touko – that caused a look of confusion to cross Noriko's face.

That day.

Last Saturday.

On the way home, she'd felt a vague sense of uneasiness, so she got off the bus early and returned to school. It was as though Touko's expression when they'd parted had been calling her back.

Even now, Noriko thought her decision had been correct. When she got back to school, she found Touko alone in the courtyard, crouched down and counting aloud.

No, she hadn't been alone the whole time. Rosa Chinensis had been with her until just before that point. She'd left when she saw Noriko in the hallway, through the window, with a look that seemed to say, "I'll leave the rest to you."

Noriko wasn't able to ask what had happened when they passed each other. Rosa Chinensis had a stern expression that made it impossible to inquire.

The usually elegant, domineering queen's expression showed no leniency whatsoever. It almost seemed like she was the most relieved that Noriko had returned.

As Touko kept counting, Noriko touched her shoulder. At that moment, Touko had looked like she was about to cry — or maybe she'd been crying already.

Something must have happened between her and Rosa Chinensis. But Noriko couldn't imagine what that might be.

It was probably related to Yumi-sama. This was pure intuition, with nothing to base it on, but it felt right. It would explain why Rosa Chinensis had looked so uncompromising, and why Touko had been so devastated.

Because Rosa Chinensis and Touko both loved Yumi-sama. So only a fight about Yumi-sama would make them lose their composure.

Right. At that time, Touko had been different to her usual self.

She'd latched on to Noriko's hand and called out her name, like a drowning person deliriously grabbing on to a helping hand.

(At the time, I thought she was going to open her heart.)

But after that, they hadn't really talked much, and parted ways at the train station. On Monday, Touko had completely returned to her usual self.

What on earth had happened that Saturday afternoon? It almost seemed like a dream.

"Touko."

Noriko tried calling out to her.

"Wha~at?"

There. She'd responded with a fake smile, like normal.

"Are you participating in today's treasure hunt?"

"Who knows."

Either she was still deciding, or she'd already made up her mind but didn't want to say. Either way, she was intentionally being vague, avoiding the question, and running away.

"It's not something you should worry about, Noriko."

Noriko.

That was another thing worrying her.

Since Monday, Touko had been calling her "Noriko," without an honorific. So she had to conclude that what happened on Saturday hadn't been a dream.

What on earth was Touko thinking?

She wasn't saying anything, even to her new best-friend, Noriko.

So then.

What if, right now, Touko herself was still in the middle of her own crisis?

Part 2

When she left the classroom at lunch time, Sachiko-onee-sama was out in the hallway.

Touko didn't know whether she was just coincidentally passing by the first-years' area, or whether she was lying in wait. Touko tilted her head down, part bow and part hanging her head in shame, and went to walk by when Sachiko-onee-sama said:

"Are you running away?"

(Running away?)

Touko stopped and turned around, wondering what Sachiko-onee-sama was talking about.

"The treasure hunt. Are you participating? Or not?"

"I don't understand what you're saying. Whether or not I participate in the treasure hunt is no concern of yours, Rosa Chinensis. But even if I don't participate, I don't think you could call that running away."

Talking to Sachiko-onee-sama brought back memories of last Saturday. Touko thought that she'd been wrong to look down upon the Red Rose sœurs. She'd even apologized for it. But these were two separate matters.

"I suppose."

Sachiko-onee-sama muttered.

"Although it seems consistent to me."

"Consistent?"

"How you're always running away from Yumi."

"_"

Touko wanted to retort with something, but she couldn't find the words. If she remained silent, that may be taken as tacit agreement. Nonetheless, she couldn't even come up with a hackneyed excuse.

"Are you afraid of facing Yumi?"

"Huh?"

"It's frightening. I'm afraid too."

The words coming from Sachiko-onee-sama's mouth were completely unexpected.

"Because she's so honest. I'm sure she doesn't mean to, but being with her is an assault on your weaknesses. Like they're reflected in a perfectly clear mirror. I don't want to look ... don't want to admit to them."

She looked down, then abruptly smiled. Seeing that expression, Touko instinctively asked:

"So then why are you still with her?"

"Isn't it obvious? I love Yumi."

Sachiko-onee-sama raised her head and answered clearly.

"It's an assault on my weaknesses, but so what? It's certainly confronting, but by no means unendurable. Not being with Yumi would be much more tough. I came to the conclusion that if there were parts of me that I don't like, then when I see them in the clear mirror that is Yumi, I should try and change them. If I'm feeling envious of a sapling growing straight upwards, then I could lean against it, or tie myself to it, and we could reach for the sun together."

She seemed to be saying it was better to move forwards than to just be afraid; that there was a meaning to being together.

Why was she saying that kind of thing now?

Sachiko-onee-sama had been angry when she'd accused Touko of acting high and mighty. Given that, she could have cut off all contact. So then, why?

"I'd accepted that one day Yumi would chose a petite sœur. Thinking about the type of girl she'd chose as her sœur left me feeling both happy and sad. But if Yumi chose her, then she was the right girl. That's what I believed. Even now, I want to believe it."

Sachiko-onee-sama eyes were calm as she spoke.

"But you can't even be my rival."

But in those calm eyes, her fighting spirit shone through.

"Of course, the first person to find Yumi's card today isn't necessarily the person that cares the most about her. Even so, I thought you were the only one that could be my rival, Touko-chan. But if you're not going to line up on the start line – what a waste."

She let out a deep sigh.

Touko knew that Sachiko-onee-sama was being intentionally provocative. She knew this, but —

"Wait a minute."

The next moment, Touko had called out to stop Sachiko-onee-sama from walking away.

"I never said I wasn't going to participate."

Then Sachiko-onee-sama looked back over her shoulder and smiled in satisfaction.

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. I'll be there."

Even though she'd been provoked, it was by no means a bad feeling.

Ahh, Tea Party

Part 1

After school.

As arranged, both the organizers and the participants in the Valentine's Day event gathered in the courtyard once they'd finished cleaning.

Since the Lillian Kawaraban had repeatedly carried the message that anyone not present at 3:40pm would be disqualified, most of the participants had been thinking about likely hiding spots as they cleaned and then made their way to the courtyard by 3:30pm – ten minutes early – and waited.

Yumi and the other hosts were to stay in the parlor on the second-floor of the Rose Mansion until just before the start.

"Hoho."

Yoshino-san kept peeking out the window from behind the curtain as she spoke.

"I'd have hated it if there weren't as many participants as last year, when it was Sachiko-sama and Rei-chan hiding their cards, but there's quite a lot of people out there."

There were three other people in the room but none of them were by a window. Yoshino-san was the only one peeking outside. If they'd all gathered around to take a look, they would undoubtedly have been spotted by the students waiting out in the courtyard, and that would have been quite embarrassing. At any rate, if they were spotted, they couldn't very well go out on a balcony and elegantly address them like Marie Antoinette.

"Oh, there's Sachiko-sama. Yumi-san's fans are slowly creeping over towards her. I wonder what they're planning. I guess they'll probably follow her around, like what happened with us last year. In that case, I hope they're brave."

Then, without a moment's delay, Noriko-chan interjected.

""You girls, stop following me!" Like that?"

"Oh, that's good!"

Yoshino-san heartily applauded this unexpected imitation. Shimako-san played the part of the onnee-sama, chiding her petite sœur with a "Noriko."

Yumi remained seated, fixed to her chair.

"Hey, it hasn't even started yet, you don't have to sit there so nervous."

Yoshino-san joked, looking back over her shoulder.

"Well, I suppose."

But even so, what else should she do? There was no point having a strategy meeting this late in the game, and the newspaper club was handling all the setup and behind-the-scenes work, so there wasn't anything for the hosts to do.

"Oh, right. There might be some students that won't want to track dirt into the Rose Mansion, so we should —"

Hitting upon this idea, Yumi stood up, but Noriko-chan interrupted her.

"Put some damp rags out? I left three of them by the Rose Mansion entrance earlier."

"Ah ... I see."

So she sat down.

"We could check on the first floor storeroom, since we won't be able to go down there once it starts."

"But we just gave it a quick tidy-up at lunch-time."

Shimako-san smiled as she straightened the notice board hanging on the wall.

"And you were the one that said we should let our visitors see the Rose Mansion as it usually is, and not dress it up just for them, Yumi-san."

"That's true."

In the end, it looked like all she could do was sit and wait for the event to start.

On that topic, Mami-san had repeatedly told them not to get in the newspaper club's way and be a nuisance. Yumi in particular had been cautioned to watch what she said both before and during the event, so she wouldn't let slip a hint. She'd been labeled as someone requiring extra attention because she usually let everything she thought show on her face.

"Oh, there's a surprise."

With five minutes left until the beginning of the event, Yoshino-san called out, still keeping watch over the courtyard.

"Touko-chan's arrived."

Naturally, the other three were all surprised when they heard this too.

"Touko's...."

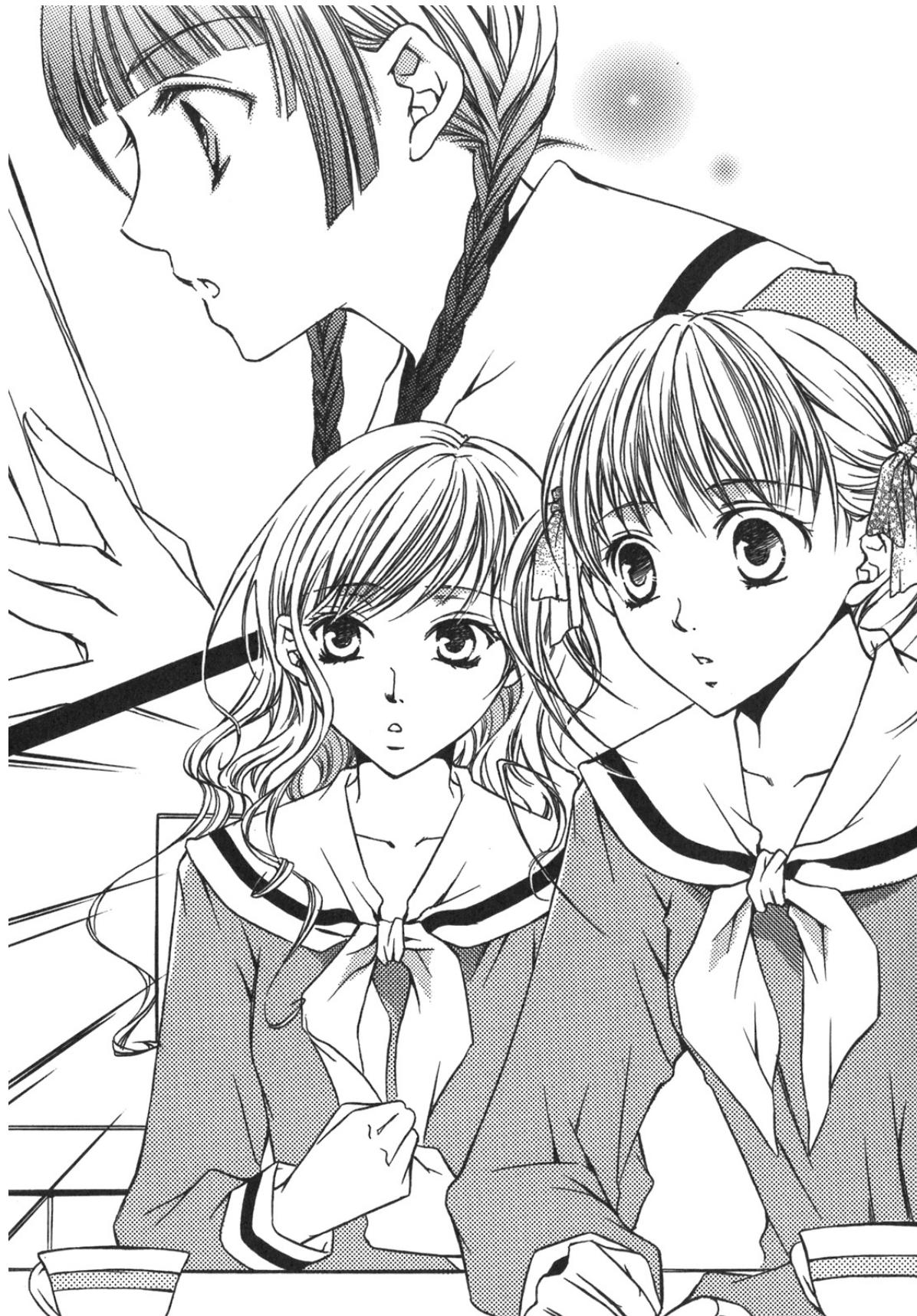
Apparently even her classmate, Noriko-chan, hadn't known. Or, more likely, when they'd spoke in the morning, Touko hadn't given a concrete answer and instead left her with the impression that she wouldn't participate.

"Yumi-san."

Shimako-san patted her on the shoulder. As though to say, "Isn't that great?"

"Yeah."

Yumi smiled back at her.



Perhaps this was Touko-chan's attempt to meet her half way. But even if it wasn't, the fact that Touko-chan had decided to participate in the treasure hunt was enough to please Yumi.

On Saturday, they'd left the school building together and then parted ways at the statue of Maria-sama. Yumi still had no idea why Touko-chan had attacked her with such venom back then.

She thought that it was probably a misunderstanding, although she had spent some time wondering whether she had done something to offend Touko-chan and just been too thick-headed to notice.

If it was a misunderstanding, then it should be cleared up. If she'd caused offense, then she should apologize. But she couldn't do that until she knew the cause. Saying, "I'm sorry but I don't know why," would just make Touko-chan even angrier.

So Yumi had decided to leave Touko-chan alone for a little while. Just until Touko-chan was willing to meet and talk with her.

Yumi didn't think that anything unrecoverable would happen by leaving her alone, since Touko-chan had Noriko-chan as her friend. Touko-chan would be okay as long as she had Noriko-chan.

Yumi still didn't know why Touko-chan had been so angry, but it had to be something serious to warrant that level of emotion.

If only Touko-chan hadn't reacted by slamming her heart shut. She was still coming to school as usual. And today, she'd been composed enough to participate in the event.

"Yumi-san, want to see?"

Yoshino-san offered up her place by the window, but Yumi declined and remained seated.

It was good to know that Touko-chan was there. It was good just to know that Touko-chan was there.

"Our three stars and Noriko-chan, don't you think it's about time you made an

appearance in the courtyard?"

Mami-san called out to them up the stairway.

"An appearance, huh."

It made them sound like princesses. The four girls exchanged glances and laughed.

Then the four princesses fired themselves up by standing in a huddle, layering their hands one atop the other, and shouting "Let's do it!" before descending the squeaky staircase.

Part 2

"Now it's time to start the Future Roses' Treasure Hunt."

Mami-san announced through a megaphone.

At the same time, the three future Roses – Shimako-san, Yoshino-san and Yumi – made their appearance, and the cheer from the assembled students echoed into the cloudy winter sky.

"We'll begin by sealing off the second-chance draw."

That phrase was the signal for Noriko-chan to appear holding the box that had been set up in the Rose Mansion for second-chance entries.

Mami-san sealed the entry slot with masking tape, then used a thick marker pen to write "Not to be opened until after the cards have been returned" so that it covered both the box and the tape. This way, neither Mami-san nor the future Roses would be able to tamper with the contents.

The students that were about to participate in the treasure hunt weren't eligible for the second-chance draw, so they had no stake in that entry box. Even so, they were lured in by Mami-san's performance and let out an "Oooh."

"Now, I trust all you participants have your entry forms with you? Anyone that doesn't, please raise your hand."

After checking the smattering of raised hands, Noriko-chan set down the second-chance entry box and ran about handing out entry forms. Watching this unfold, a portion of the students made an "Oh?" expression.

Why was Rosa Gigantea en bouton doing this? Other than Mami-san, where were all the newspaper club members?

Actually, while these questions seemed the same, there were subtly different

answers to the two.

"Would all the sœurs of the future Roses come over here, please. You will be given a five minute handicap again this year."

Sachiko-sama was the only person that followed these directions. Noriko-chan didn't move towards the indicated spot beside Mami-san.

"Thank you, Fukuzawa Yumi-san's onee-sama, Ogasawara Sachiko-sama. I can confirm that Shimazu Yoshino-san's onee-sama, Hasekura Rei-sama, has already made an entry in the second-chance draw. And finally —"

Mami-san looked at Noriko-chan as she spoke.

"Toudou Shimako-san's petite sœur, Nijou Noriko-san, has chosen to assist with today's event as part of the staff instead of participating – for which she has our gratitude."

The students that had been watching Noriko-chan in confusion, and those that hadn't noticed, all had expressions that said, "Why?" When the treasure hunt was first announced, the Lillian Kawaraban had printed an article stating that the future Roses' sœurs would be participating. Accordingly, Sachiko-sama was standing ready to accept her five minute handicap. Rei-sama couldn't be present today because she had exams, so she'd placed her hope in the repechage round for losers (meaning someone who couldn't be present on the day) called the "second-chance draw." But, Noriko-chan.

"I was happy just to hear that my onee-sama wanted to search for my card. So I'll stay by my onee-sama's side and assist where I can."

Was what she'd said when she decided not to participate. There wasn't even a trace of resignation or self-denial about it. Rather than spending the intervening time away from Shimako-san for a chance to search for her card, Noriko-chan had chosen to experience those hardships together with her onee-sama. Perhaps Noriko-chan felt that even if she didn't search for it, she already had Shimako-san's card in her heart.

So that explained why Noriko-chan was assisting, but it still left the mystery of where all the newspaper club members were. The answer was that, at present, they were distributing the cards and hints throughout the school.

Last year had been the first year for this event, and both the organizers and the participants hadn't really known what they were doing, so a certain amount of bumbling was acceptable. But having seen how it turned out, certain ragged edges became apparent based on things they'd noticed and predictions about how the next one would go. So, in the lead up to this year's event, they'd made certain improvements.

One of those was that the cards weren't hidden until just before the event.

Last year, Sachiko-sama had buried her crimson card in the old greenhouse early in the morning, and Rei-sama's yellow card had remained hidden in a book in the library for quite a while too.

Shimako-san's white card had been hidden just before the event, but that was only possible because the spot she'd chosen: the committee notice board made it easy since it looked like she was just posting a notice.

But this year was different. Things were a bit more complicated. The newspaper club members had to cover the area of the treasure hunt in a very short period of time.

It was more complicated because it would be a complete waste if they hid the cards at their leisure and they were discovered ahead of time. So they'd decided to hide the cards when all the participants were gathered in the courtyard, just prior to the start. The repeated warnings that anyone not in the courtyard at 3:40pm would not be able to participate were so that the participants wouldn't be able to see them hide the cards.

The registration forms had been distributed a couple of days ahead of time, rather than immediately before the start like last year, to reduce the number of people required (in fact, it had all been left up to Noriko-chan to deal with).

The registration form was more or less the same as last year. It was split into two parts by a line to cut along, with the top part containing the treasure hunt rules and the bottom part a statement that the participants would sign saying they'd abide by the rules. On the back, the top part contained a map of the school building and surrounds, with a dashed line showing the bounds of the treasure hunt. Basically, anything within the dotted line was in-bounds, and everything outside was out-of-bounds.

This year, the bounds were extended along the gingko-tree path to just before the school entrance. Naturally, it didn't extend into the neighboring university, nor into the security guard's hut near the door.

"There are three cards that look like this: one red, one white, and one yellow. The first person to find them will be awarded the half-day date with the respective future Rose. Any ties will be decided by scissors-paper-rock."

Mami-san held up an example card as she continued her explanation.

"But it's not just the cards that are hidden. There's also hints and advice, so take care when you're searching."

This was also a new experiment this year.

They wanted to make it as fun as possible while also avoiding inconveniencing any of the staff and non-high school students – as much as they could for an event that was held on school grounds. But if they wrote down all of the things to be mindful of, the rules would have to be written in such a small font that people would get bored and just skip over them. So, they decided to put up warnings at places where the students would have to take extra care, and since it would be boring just to have warnings, they decided to mix some hints in too.

"Now if you could all check that you've filled out your name, grade, class, and student number correctly on the entry form."

After answering all the participant's questions, Mami-san surveyed the courtyard and lazily nodded. The participants were all focused on Mami-san so they probably hadn't noticed, but the newspaper club members had been slowly trickling back and the last one had just returned.

"The event ends at 4:40pm. You can start once you've handed in your form."

With that, the curtain was raised on the Future Roses' Treasure Hunt.

Part 3

It was the same as last year, in that while the participants could be seen as a single group, once they'd submitted their forms there was a wide variety of subsequent actions.

Some ran away from the courtyard as fast as they could, some joined together in groups of friends to discuss, and others started by searching the courtyard — perhaps remembering the proverb that it's hardest to see what's right under your nose. And then.

There were those that kept watch over the one student that had been given a delayed start. About ten girls. Probably all first-years.

"You don't have to worry about me. You can start your search already."

Sachiko-sama said, indicating that she didn't need the company.

"Is it a bother if we wait until you start, Rosa Chinensis?"

"Not at all, but if you wait for me then it makes the handicap pointless, doesn't it?"

Sachiko-sama smiled apologetically, still not understanding that those girls were going to follow her around.

(You girls, stop following me!)

It seemed like Noriko-chan's impersonation would soon be echoed by the real thing. Yumi probably wouldn't be present to witness it, but she shuddered just imagining it. The first-years would probably break down in tears.

"Your five minutes is up."

Mami-san announced to Sachiko-sama, indicating that she could now start.

"I see."

But Sachiko-sama didn't spring into action immediately. She handed her entry form to Mami-san, then looked at the sky over the courtyard and took a deep breath.

"Yumi-san, please come with me."

Yumi was intrigued by her onnee-sama's actions, but she followed Mami-san into the Rose Mansion as requested. The task assigned to the three future Roses was to wait in the headquarters — the Rose Mansion's second-floor salon — for the cards to be found, or the time limit to be reached.

As Mami-san led her through the Rose Mansion foyer, they heard Sachiko-sama's voice call out from behind.

"I thought I might have some tea in the Rose Mansion. How about you girls?"

(Huh...?)

Yumi and Mami-san's eyes met. They looked back and, just like she'd said, Sachiko-sama was walking towards them.

"Hey, Yumi-san, why's your onnee-sama coming for tea instead of looking for your card?"

Ahead of them, Yoshino-san had also been surprised by this and stopped to turn around and inquire. Was it because she'd given up on the treasure hunt already, or because she was so confident in her belief that she was the only one who could find Yumi's hidden card?

"You didn't let anything slip to Sachiko-sama, did you?"

"... I don't think so."

Yumi shook her head slightly under Mami-san's penetrating gaze.

She certainly hadn't let any verbal hints slip. Or rather, they hadn't had many opportunities to meet of late, and when they had met they didn't discuss the treasure hunt at all. She couldn't have let anything slip, although that didn't hold

if Sachiko-sama has ESP.

"Tea! I'll get the tea ready!"

Realizing that they would soon have visitors, Noriko-chan dashed up the stairs, passing both Shimako-san and Yoshino-san.

Sachiko-sama entered the Rose Mansion accompanied by five first-years. Last year, Satou Sei-sama had acted like a pick-up artist, bringing students back to the Rose Mansion.

Naturally, not all of the first-years had accepted Sachiko-sama's invitation. About half of them had gone off to search on their own rather than sit around and drink tea.

"So this is how it's going to be."

Yumi's group all hurried so they could get there first and welcome their guests when they arrived.

It would be fine. They had prepared plenty of teacups and extra chairs because they'd expected that something like this might happen. While there were certain physical imitations, it had been the dream of the previous Rosa Chinensis, Mizuno Youko-sama, to see the Rose Mansion overflowing with students, and those ideals had been inherited by the current Red Rose sœurs.

"Alright, let's start with Yumi-san here, Yoshino-san there, and Shimako-san over there."

Mami-san briskly issued the instructions. It seemed she'd given some thought to this — if the hosts were all seated together in a group it might have made it harder to approach them. As time went on, people would probably move around, or come and go, but it seemed she wanted to start things off on the right foot.

Yumi sat down "here," Yoshino-san sat down "there," but before Shimako-san could sit down "over there," the sound of someone knocking on the door announced the arrival of their guests. As the closest person to the door, Shimako-san went to open it.

"Welcome to the Rose Mansion."

The trio called out in unison, smiling elegantly at their visitors.

So it was that the treasure hunt's competing event, the tea party, got off to a modest — but at least outwardly respectable — start.

It began with a gathering of the Rose Mansion inhabitants and five other girls.

But as time went on, the tea party would prove to be neither "modest" nor "competing."

Part 4

At first, it was a leisurely tea party.

Since the treasure hunt had only just started, the participants were relaxed, thinking, "It won't have been found just yet," but forgetting that the early bird catches the worm. Although the truth of that matter was reflected in the fact that no-one had appeared at the headquarters claiming victory.

The only sounds that could be heard on the second floor of the Rose Mansion were the chattering of girls that sounded a bit like birds singing, bursts of laughter that sounded like bells ringing, and the bubbling and whistling of the electric kettle. All soft sounds.

Even after finishing her cup of tea, Sachiko-sama still didn't leave the room. And since Sachiko-sama didn't make a move, neither did the first-years that she'd invited.

"May I have another cup?"

Sachiko-sama asked Noriko-chan, lazily raising her teacup. Apparently she planned on staying for some time yet. Yumi wondered if she was doing this to detain the first-years, or if she wanted to experience Youko-sama's dream for just a little while longer.

But apparently she was over-thinking it.

"Rosa Chinensis, are you so calm and composed because you've guessed where the card is hidden?"

One of the first-years asked, unable to endure the wait any longer. Depending on the answer, she was probably going to reconsider her own actions up to now.

"Hmm?"

Sachiko-sama tilted her head in confusion. Apparently she didn't understand what she was being asked.

"You've guessed where Yumi-sama's hidden her card, and it's such an obscure location that you've got plenty of time, right? Otherwise, I can't understand why you'd be relaxing here drinking tea."

Then another first-year leaned in and asked:

"Or did you never intend to look for the card?"

Quite right. They'd followed Sachiko-sama because they expected that the onee-sama of a host would search for her card. But if Sachiko-sama never intended to look for her card, they'd have to quickly abandon their strategy.

"You're both wrong."

Meaning that she hadn't guessed where the card was, but she hadn't given up searching either.

"It's because here ... I'm by Yumi's side."

"Huh?"

The first-years responded, looking like they'd been tricked. Yumi had also been quietly listening in, and while she didn't have a mirror, she was sure she had the same dumbfounded expression. Sachiko-sama had said that she was here because she didn't know where the card was — it was incomprehensible.

"If I don't know where it is, I'm hardly going to find it by searching at random, am I?"

Well, that may be true. But even so, if she just stayed here and didn't search, she'd eventually run out of time.

"But, Rosa Chinensis, didn't you say that you haven't given up?"

"Yes, of course."

Sachiko-sama smiled.

"I entered into this event because I wanted to find Yumi's card."

"Um...."

The second-floor of the Rose Mansion was filled with looks of confusion.

"You don't understand?"

Sachiko-sama said, "Right now I'm waiting," then looked straight at Yumi.

"Waiting for Rosa Chinensis en bouton to reveal her faults."

In a way, that may be the strongest strategy.

Part 5

About that time, kendo club member Tanuma Chisato's eyes were drawn to a round, CD-sized piece of drawing paper affixed to the committee notice board.

The top part — basically, from 11 to 1 o'clock — contained an illustration of a white rose and the word "Hint." The lower part, at 6 o'clock, had "1/7" written.

And then.

The rest of the space in the center was taken up by the single hiragana character "ma" written in big, bold strokes.

""Ma'?"

It didn't take much thought to realize that this was a clue to the whereabouts of Shimako-san's card.

But, "ma."

What the heck did that mean?

A Shortcut and Dropping In on the Way

Part 1

It was 4:10pm, and about half of the time allotted for the treasure hunt had elapsed.

The "elegant tea party" continued on the second floor of the Rose Mansion, although it had probably dropped the "elegant" qualifier.

While the event itself was about half over, the tea party had only been going for about ten or fifteen minutes, since the time it took to read the rules and the hosts' sœurs' handicap had to be factored in. Not much time had passed since Sachikosama's declaration that she was "Waiting for Rosa Chinensis en bouton to reveal her faults."

Anyway.

"Rosa Gigantea, what's this 'ru'?"

"What about 'ta'?"

The Rose Mansion was now busy with the clatter of treasure hunt participants as they came and went.

"It's a hint, so you have to come up with the answer yourself."

This was how Shimako-san would answer whenever she was asked. Even though Shimako-san was never going to just give the answer away, the number of people in the Rose Mansion had swelled as treasure hunt participants found the hints and rushed over. So it continued, with new groups rushing in and some staying for the tea party.

All up, there were seven white cards with hints. The "1/7" indicated as much, although there was always the possibility that some girls may have misread that as "January 7" and were running around the grounds looking for the plants used in the Festival of Herbs that took place on that date. All that could be said about

such a conclusion was sometimes a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.

On another note, Sachiko-sama was, obviously, still there. Yumi considered this to be a given, since she hadn't revealed her faults yet.

Yumi felt like she was being watched from all sides, as Sachiko-sama once again weighed on her mind.

A little while ago, Sachiko-sama had jotted something down in her student notebook, but Yumi didn't think she'd done anything particular noteworthy. All she'd done since the tea party started was sit in her seat and listen to the conversation going on around her. Naturally, she'd respond when someone talked to her, but she wasn't volunteering any topics and she had to shut out the repeated pleas from the first-years: "Give us a hint."

(That's right. Reveal my weaknesses?)

It left her feeling a bit strange.

What fate would befall the red card she'd hidden as treasure? She tried thinking about what she'd like to see happen, but she couldn't clearly define one single outcome as the one she wanted.

As a petite sœur, she wanted Sachiko-sama to find it.

As a host, it would be no fun if it was found easily.

But if the event ended with no-one finding it, then it meant that she hadn't chosen a suitable hiding spot, and that wouldn't have been "fun" either. So in that case, where was the person who would find it? She idly wondered what Touko-chan was doing right at that moment.

The more she thought about it, the more complicated her feelings became.

"Yumi-sama, should I refill your teacup? It must be cold by now, right?"

Noriko-chan whispered in her ear.

"Thanks, but I'm fine."

Yumi cupped the teacup in her hands.

Cold though it may be, there was still about half a cup of black tea in there.

"Now that I think about it, you haven't been drinking much tea, Yumi-sama."

One of the first-years pointed out.

"Is there some sort of reason for that?"

"A reason?"

There was indeed a reason.

"Oh, it's not just Yumi-san."

Yoshino-san said, seated a little distance away.

"Shimako-san and I are holding back too."

She walked over and held out her empty cup, saying, "See."

"I carelessly drank the whole lot, but I've been avoiding getting a refill. If we drank too much, we'd have to go to the restroom, right?"

Hearing this explanation, their guests nodded in comprehension. This was then followed up with a, "But."

"But we're in the same boat. What should I do? The tea was so good I've already had two cups."

Yumi hastily waved her hands at the perplexed first-years.

"You girls are free to get up and go to the restroom whenever you like. But for us ... the people that hid the cards, if we recklessly left the Rose Mansion, how to put this ... it'd just cause confusion, right? That's all it is. Okay?"

Yumi looked to Shimako-san for assistance, but Shimako-san was looking in a completely different direction.

"Shima—"

Before Yumi could finish calling out to her, Shimako-san started speaking.

"What is it, Noriko?"

(Noriko-chan?)

Hearing that name, Yumi also looked towards the sink. Noriko-chan had just been offering her tea a moment ago, but now she was back at the sink, by the electric kettle. This was her "home" position for today, but at least she had a chair to sit on.

"What's the matter?"

Shimako-san asked again. At that point, Noriko-chan finally noticed the gazes directed at her and, a bit surprised, said, "Ah, nothing." It felt like she was there in body but not in spirit.

"Sorry, but can I be excused for a little while?"

As she spoke, she made her way over to the so-called biscuit door, indicating that she was asking whether it was okay for her to leave the room.

"Fine by me?"

Mami-san gave her permission.

Noriko-chan had originally intended to participate in the treasure hunt, but kindly volunteered to assist instead, so she had plenty of work to do thus far. There was no way she would be denied a short break.

"My deepest apologies, when you're refraining from this, onee-samas."

Noriko-chan bowed apologetically then exited the room.

"She really must have needed the bathroom."

Mami-san mumbled, looking out the window.

Noriko-chan had carefully descended the staircase to avoid making any noise, but as soon as she stepped out of the Rose Mansion she had started sprinting, flat out, towards the school buildings.

Part 2

"It looks like the hints are only for Shimako-san's card...."

Seven hints, apparently.

While she hadn't yet encountered a second hint, she'd more or less figured it out by catching fragments of conversations between students that were walking around the grounds looking at their maps. While some of it may have been bogus information, she heard the word "hint" paired with "White Rose" numerous times, but never with "Red" or "Yellow Rose."

("Ta" is the "ta" from Tanuma. "Ma" is the "ma" from Tanuma. Yeah, right.)

Chisato smiled.

It was fun. A year ago, she never would have believed that the treasure hunt could be this fun.

Last year, she'd approached it with a win-at-all-costs attitude, thinking that she absolutely had to get Rei-sama's card and the half-day date that came with it. She hadn't allowed herself the luxury of enjoying it, instead she'd cast off her pride and adopted the tactic of following Yoshino-san, who seemed most likely to know where Rei-sama's card was. This idea had also occurred to some other fans of Rei-sama, and they joined forces.

In the end, while Yoshino-san made a baffling stopover in the library, they'd combed through some likely looking books and found the yellow card. Chisato then won the game of scissors-paper-rock, granting her the ticket for a half-day date. Ah, youth.

(Last year, I was thinking it didn't matter how I got it.)

Naturally, the game of scissors-paper-rock had been above board. She hadn't waited until she saw her opponent's move, or anything like that.

"I heard there was a 'ku' in the old greenhouse."

As Chisato walked towards the library, a lively pair of first-years dashed past.

("Ku." ... That's another one for the list.)

With lots of people moving around, the chances of this sort of information leaking out were high. Those girls were chatting normally, seemingly unaware that a rival was nearby and that they'd just handed her a clue.

In a similar vein, they'd be better off acting independently. In the rare event that they did happen to speak to themselves, it would only be to themselves, and wouldn't be loud enough to carry to someone else. Plus, if they did find the treasure, they'd have it all to themselves and wouldn't have to play scissors-paper-rock.

(What a pity. There's no "ku" in Tanuma.)

Well, she knew from the outset that that wouldn't be the solution. At any rate, the characters she knew were "ta," "ma," and "ku." If the seven characters were all collected and placed in the correct order, they'd probably point to the hiding place.

(Ta/ma/ku, ta/ku/ma ... ta/ku/ma/shi/i (strong)?)

That wasn't right, it only used five characters.

(Maybe something like ta/ku/ma/shi/i se/i/to (strong student)?)

She counted this out on her fingers. That wasn't right either, it had one character too many. But more than that, what would "strong student" mean? How would anyone get the hiding place from that?

(Let's just pause this.)

Chisato suspended her speculations and entered the library. If she had the other four hints, then she might be able to come up with an answer — but she had absolutely no confidence that she would be able to.

Aside from that, Chisato's preferred target this time around was Yoshino-san's

yellow card.

However, with all due respect to Yoshino-san, Chisato wasn't absolutely desperate to go on a date with her, unlike last year. But it would leave everyone gobsmacked if she found the yellow card two years in a row. Just thinking about it brought a smile to her lips, so she'd taken it on as a challenge. Adding to the entertainment was her own opinion that last year's finder of Shimako-san's card, Rosa Canina, had felt the same way.

Now then.

There were a lot more students in the reading room than usual.

That was to be expected. The yellow card had been found in the reading room last year. It seemed obvious enough that the students that knew this would want to check here, just in case.

(That's pretty much why I came here too.)

But Chisato ignored the not-for-loan books on prices in the Edo period, where the card was found last year. Whatever the circumstances, having the card hidden in the same spot two years in a row was uninspired. Even if it was meant as a double bluff, enough time had elapsed since the start for it to be found.

(Instead of that.)

Chisato walked over to the "How-to" section.

(If I remember correctly....)

Last year, Yoshino-san had been looking through books in this area. Chisato followed Yoshino-san's actions from last year and flipped through the books in the cooking and handicraft shelves.

It had stuck with her ever since then. Why had Yoshino-san been fixated on this section? What made her think that the card was hidden in one of these books?

That pair had such a unique relationship, it might be they alone could answer those questions.

Even so, Chisato couldn't help but look. And since it was Yoshino-san's turn to hide the card this year, perhaps she had chosen this location.

"Oh, is that you, Tanuma Chisato-san?"

A voice called out to her from behind, just as she'd established that her search had been in vain.

"Ah...."

She turned around and there was —

"Gokigenyou."

The Photography Club's ace, Takeshima Tsutako-san, was standing there, holding her trademark camera and smiling. She was accompanied by a first-year, and Chisato asked if this was her petite sœur, to which Tsutako-san replied in the negative. Although, from the outside, they did look like a close pair of sœurs.

Tsutako-san gently raised her camera and said:

"It must be fate that we met here. Do you mind if I take a photo? I'll call it, let's see, 'Last Year's Winner.' You wouldn't be opposed to it appearing in the Lillian Kawaraban, right?"

"Not at all. By all means, take the photo. It'll make a nice memento."

Chisato happily agreed. Then she followed along as Tsutako-san indicated where she should stand. They were still in the reference section, but the different lighting or background probably made for a better picture overall. Although Tsutako-san said that when she captured the decisive moment she didn't concern herself about such things.

"Although, if possible, I'd like to drop 'Last Year's' from that title."

Chisato said as she looked straight at the camera lens.

"Oh, that's good. In that case, I'll have to change the title. 'Back to Back Winner' ... no, how about, 'Winner Again This Year'?"

A flash of light and the sweet sound of the shutter clicking overlaid Tsutako-san's voice. Just like she'd said earlier, the flash and the shutter only went off once. But, because of that, Chisato had the feeling that it would be a good photo. Every single one of Tsutako-san's photos was the real deal.

"Thanks for your cooperation."

"I'd like a copy of that, okay?"

"Of course."

A couple of students were attracted by the flash, but most of them didn't notice as they kept searching for the cards. Tsutako-san had probably been taking photos before Chisato had arrived and they were used to it by now.

It looked like Tsutako-san and the younger girl had hit upon a likely hiding place and were combing the area as thoroughly as possible. So even if they didn't capture the moment of victory, they'd still be able to get lots of good pictures of students searching for the cards.

Tsutako-san said that she'd turned down all the requests for commemorative sœur photos in front of the statue of Maria-sama for the duration of this year's treasure hunt, so that she could dedicate herself to the event.

Then Chisato floated a question:

"You're not part of the event staff, Tsutako-san?"

Tsutako-san was holding the exact same map that Chisato had. The one that was printed along with the entry form; the half that the participants were left with. Since she was holding that, it meant —

"No."

Tsutako-san confirmed this.

"I'm not an organizer, just a regular participant. Although Mami-san did tell me that the Lillian Kawaraban would print any good photos I took."

"But surely it would have been better if you were involved in the event."

If she knew where the cards were, she could wait nearby and get a great shot. But apparently that was thinking too shallowly, because Tsutako-san said:

"Sure, I'd love to get a shot of the moment a card was found. But, because of that, me being in a location would instantly reveal to the participants that it was a hiding place, right?"

"I see."

Chisato clapped her hands together. Tsutako-san knowing the hiding locations would spoil the treasure hunt.

"Besides, even if I knew where all three cards were hidden, I'm only one person."

Tsutako-san folded her arms and let out a sigh. She seemed to be seriously considering this scenario, even though it was only hypothetical. Asking herself where she would wait, in that situation.

— Indeed, it was quite the conundrum.

Part 3

After parting ways with Tsutako-san and her helper, Chisato returned to the school building.

Going to the library and looking at all those books had reminded her that she'd borrowed a book from Yamamura-sensei. It was a kendo manual from when Yamamura-sensei had been in school that was written in a very easy to understand manner but was now out of print, and the library didn't have a copy.

Chisato had borrowed it a week ago and Yamamura-sensei had told her she should return it whenever she was done with it, so it didn't have to be done today. But Chisato had decided that she would definitely return it today.

She was incredibly grateful to her teacher for lending her such a precious book and she wanted to convey those feelings one way or another.

Whenever her mother borrowed something, she'd return it with a small no-strings-attached gift. Chisato wanted to mimic this behavior, to be more adult, but she was inexperienced in this sort of thing and the no-strings-attached gift was tricky. And her target this time was a teacher at her school, and her club's adviser. Even if she said it was to express her gratitude, she wasn't sure whether or not it would be accepted.

But today was different. Public gift giving was permitted today. Chisato intended to also hand over a small box of chocolates when she returned the book.

Typically, the teachers wouldn't accept presents. But Yamamura-sensei was a graduate of Lillian's, so she understood the students' feelings and didn't outright reject the gifts. Chisato had actually been to the staff room at lunch time but there had been such a crowd around Yamamura-sensei's desk that she didn't have an opportunity to jump in.

Of course, it wasn't just Yamamura-sensei — Katori-sensei and Hoshina-sensei

were in a similar situation too. In general, the female high school teachers were more popular with the students, which was most unfortunate for the male teachers on this particular day.

With all that going on, she hadn't completed her task at lunchtime, and then she'd got caught up in the treasure hunt after school. On reflection, everyone probably wanted to hand over their gifts at lunchtime because they expected they'd be busy after school.

(The teachers are probably still in the staff room.)

The teachers would probably stay at school until the treasure hunt finished. So if she wanted to return the book, it had to be now. If she went as soon as the event was over, that small delay could be enough for Yamamura-sensei to leave. So even though it was in the middle of the game, Chisato took a break to go and see Yamamura-sensei.

(Yoshino-san's card has to be hidden in the library.)

She'd originally come up with a couple of possible locations. Like, Yoshino-san was a Kendo Club member, so maybe she'd hidden it in the martial arts building — under the tatami mats, or on the ceiling, for instance.

But now she'd completely ruled out those possibilities.

When all the participants had gathered in the courtyard, and Mami-san read out the rules, there were no other Newspaper Club members anywhere in sight. Chisato guessed that they were using that time to hide the cards.

There were three cards in total. But it wasn't just the cards, they'd also placed hints and warnings here and there.

How many members did the Newspaper Club have? Five? Six? Something like that. Not enough people to do anything too crazy. Since each card would be entrusted to just one or two people, it couldn't be hidden anywhere that required a lot of effort or complicated setup. Since they had such little time, it was hard to imagine them hiding it under the heavy tatami mats or on the high ceiling.

Since there wasn't anywhere she desperately wanted to look, she wasn't even slightly reluctant to suspend her search. So, for now, she headed to her classroom

to pick up the book she'd borrowed and the chocolates.

There was no one in the classroom.

The treasure hunt excluded certain areas that would favor specific students, as well as places that would cause a nuisance to non-participants, like inside the toilet blocks, the school infirmary, or the principal's office.

(Right, right — inside the staff room too.)

Chisato retrieved her bag with the book and chocolates from her locker and left the classroom. The hallway, which was "in-bounds," was a lot more lively than the classroom. Everyone was holding a print-out with the map and searching high and low.

Which colored card were they looking for? Surely one of the cards should have been found by now. She was pondering this sort of thing as she walked when suddenly her eyes were drawn to a solo student walking past.

(Hm?)

Why was that? Out of all the students, she was the only one that had captured Chisato's attention.

She was wearing the same school uniform as everyone else. Carrying the map in the same way. Her body wasn't distinctive either, being neither conspicuously tall nor fat.

How was she different to the other students? What about her had caught Chisato's attention?

(Ah, that's it.)

It was her eyes.

From this distance, Chisato couldn't make out the girl's pupils, but she could tell that her gaze was fixed on a specific point. Right, it was her gaze.

Amidst all the girls whose eyes wandered as they searched for a card, she stood out because she was the only one who moved with a definite purpose.

(Where could she be going?)

Chisato found herself following the girl. The staff room was getting further and further away, but she was slowly closing the gap on her. Chisato couldn't leave until she found out where that girl was going.

Eventually, she stopped in front of the social studies prep room. After determining that it wasn't locked, she turned the knob and opened the door. That was the first time that Chisato saw the girl's face clearly.

(Matsudaira Touko ... !?)

Chisato stood frozen to the spot in the hallway, before she finally remembered Yamamura-sensei and turned back towards the staff room.

As she walked, Chisato smiled to herself.

Matsudaira Touko had gone into the social studies prep room to look for a card. But that couldn't have been all it was.

She'd been so pumped up about something.

Part 4

It wasn't part of the search area, but that didn't mean they weren't allowed to go in. If those two concepts were equivalent, then it would mean that no one would be allowed in to the toilets, for example.

"Oh, you didn't have to do that."

Yamamura-sensei's desk was so quiet it was like a completely different place to lunch time.

It wasn't just Yamamura-sensei's desk — Katori-sensei's area was the same, and the situation was probably the same for Hoshina-sensei in the school infirmary. The fact that the male teachers' desks were also unchanged was a bit sad for them.

"I told you that no thanks were necessary. I always lend my books freely, especially to my darling students."

"What if that darling student said she wanted to give her teacher chocolates?"

"Not as thanks for the book?"

From her seat, Yamamura-sensei glanced up at Chisato's face. She seemed to be enjoying this theatrical haggling.

"Because she really likes you."

"In that case, I'd gladly accept."

Yamamura-sensei said, "Thank you," and took the bag containing both the book and chocolates.

"Well then, I'll take my leave."

Chisato thought she should return to the treasure hunt, since there was still about twenty minutes left. She turned to leave but Yamamura-sensei grabbed her by the sleeve and stopped her, saying, "Wait."

"You know, I mightn't look it, but I'm actually kind of absentminded."

"Uhh."

Well, Chisato wasn't really sure about that "mightn't look like it" part, but she'd sort of got a sense of the absentminded part. Yamamura-sensei was typically quite level headed, but very occasionally she would break down in tears. It wasn't a fatal flaw so everyone just smiled and accepted it. Her imperfections made her more likeable and easier to approach, so she was popular with the students.

"There it is."

Yamamura-sensei had rolled her chair back a little bit and stuck her head under her desk, before pulling something out of a paper bag under there and offering it to Chisato.

"Here."

"What's this?"

There were various colored candies wrapped up in cellophane and tied with a ribbon.

"It's a bit early, but it's a White Day present."

"Huh?"

"It'll probably slip my mind in a month's time."

Yamamura-sensei smiled and added, "Because I'm so absentminded, you know."

"Y-you don't have to do that."

Flustered by this unexpected present, Chisato took a step backwards. Her mind had been so full of thoughts of giving a gift that she hadn't considered receiving

one, so she had no idea how to handle the situation. What would her mother do at a time like this?

Making matters worse, Yamamura-sensei took Chisato's hand and slipped her the bag of candy.

"See, I like you too, Tanuma-san."

So that was it. Hearing those words, Chisato's shoulders slumped.

"In that case, I'll gladly accept it."

"Good."

Chisato didn't know how many of those candy bags Yamamura-sensei had prepared, but every student that had given her chocolates had probably received one. She was convinced that it wasn't because Yamamura-sensei would forget about it by White Day; it would be difficult for her to go around to the classroom of every student that had given her chocolates. Announcing over the school PA system that students should come and pick up their chocolates would be totally out of the question as well, so she must have decided it was better to have White Day today.

Yamamura-sensei, you're so cool.

Chisato thought that this sort of thing was why she adored Yamamura-sensei.

"You'd better get going now."

Yamamura-sensei lightly tapped Chisato on the shoulder.

"?"

"The map. You're in the middle of the treasure hunt, right? Give it your best."

"Okay."

Chisato answered energetically, and once again started to leave the staff room. She started to leave, but on the way to the door something caught her eye and she turned back again.

"What's the matter?"

Yamamura-sensei asked.

"The window...."

The curtain was caught in the closest window. She could see the part of the curtain that was caught on the outside flapping in the breeze.

The windows were opened during cleaning time and it had probably been accidentally caught there when they were closed. Chisato didn't know who had done it, but they'd probably been so cold that they quickly closed the window and not noticed.

"I'll get it."

Chisato opened the window and pulled the curtain inside.

"That should do it ... oh."

Looking out the window, Chisato spotted someone that she knew quite well walking past on the path below.

"Rei-sama!"

Chisato rolled up her map to make a bullhorn and shouted through it.

"Have you finished your exams for today?"

It looked like her senior in the Kendo Club, Hasekura Rei-sama, had just arrived at school, since she was wearing her school coat and carrying her bag.

Hearing Chisato's voice, Rei-sama stopped and looked around. Then she spotted Chisato leaning out of the staff room window and waved by way of response. Then, with that, she walked off towards the school entrance looking downcast.

She looked sort of, no, really downbeat.

More than downbeat, she seemed completely drained.

"I wonder if she bombed her exam."

* * *

However, Chisato's concerns were entirely misplaced.

The cause of Rei-sama's exhaustion was something completely different to her exams.

The Blank Map's Valley

Part 1

Rewinding time a little bit.

Rei walked down the ginkgo-tree-lined path with a spring in her step.

Earlier, she'd taken the entrance exam for her first choice university. The results wouldn't be known for some time, but her reaction had been positive — she was certain she'd be studying at that university in spring.

(Let's do this.)

She caught glimpses of high-school students off to the left of the path. Since they were holding what appeared to be maps, it seemed likely that they were participating in the treasure hunt (if they weren't, then it was a bit scary that they'd be loitering around on such a cold and gloomy day).

She'd counted seven or eight people so far, and if there were that many students all the way out here then there were bound to be a lot more closer to the school buildings. It looked like the event was a huge success.

(Excellent, excellent.)

She checked her watch, despite having done this when she got off the bus. 4:15 p.m. It was a bit of a tricky time, with the event being about half over.

Because she had taken unfamiliar public transport, the transfer hadn't gone all that smoothly and she'd wasted some time, making her later than she'd have liked. If she'd made the earlier train, she would have arrived at M Station ten minutes earlier, allowing her to get on the earlier bus, and if that had happened then there was a chance she could have been in the courtyard for the 3:45 p.m. kick-off. There must have been some traffic congestion somewhere, because she had to wait about twenty minutes for the next bus to arrive after just missing one.

But even if she had made it in time for the start, Rei wasn't qualified to take part

in the treasure hunt. Since she hadn't known whether or not she'd be able to get here in time after her exam, she'd put an entry in the second-chance draw.

So, in order for Rei to be saved, she'd have to go back in time to before she put her entry in the second-chance draw, convince herself that she'd be able to make it in time, study the train timetables carefully, and then pray to God for there to be no traffic congestion on the day of her exam. Basically, it was too late to do anything about it now.

4:15 p.m. 25 minutes until it was over.

(Someone might have already found Yoshino's card by now.)

Thinking this, she wished she had the ability to freely manipulate time. Even if she couldn't rewind time, just being able to fast-forward would be good. It would be easier to accept defeat if it was all over.

The ideal situation for Rei would be for Yoshino's card to remain hidden until time ran out. In that case, she'd suddenly be in with a chance.

(Right, it's probably hidden over there.)

Rei had complete faith that she would emerge victorious if the yellow card wasn't found in regular time and went to the second-chance draw. She should understand Yoshino the best, so who else could possibly guess the location?

(Ah, but, be that as it may....)

That couldn't come to pass while the treasure hunt was still live, so all she could do was wait until the time limit was reached, leaving her in limbo for another twenty minutes.

The spring in her step that she had when she entered through the school gates had left her.

Rei put her hand into her right coat pocket. Inside the pocket, her numb fingers rubbed against a folded piece of paper, making a muffled sound.

(Yoshino....)

Rei looked up to the heavens, in prayer. She let out a sigh and then returned her gaze to normal.

(— Huh?)

When she moved her head down, she'd caught a brief glimpse of something that gave her an uncomfortable feeling, so she took another look at that area. The so-called "second-look."

Then, what she saw was:

"That's...."

She muttered as she stared at the external wall of the school building.

What she was seeing definitely looked like "that." But would "that" really be in such a location? She couldn't completely rule out the possibility that it was a figment of her imagination, brought about by her desire to see Yoshino.

She tried to test this theory by rubbing her eyes, but the scene remained the same. This was an unprecedented situation.

The yellow card.

It was clinging to the wall of the school building.

That wasn't quite right. It wasn't clinging to the building — it was stuck there. It was at the same height as one of the windows on the second-floor and affixed to the building with masking tape.

(Is the tape directly on the card?)

No, they wouldn't have done something that silly. Rei couldn't see it out from her position, but she assumed they must have put the card in a plastic bag or something similar. Either way.

Hiding it in a place like that.

Although, since it was right out in the open, could it even be called hiding?

It was too audacious. Was she a dummy?

First of all, had they even said that that spot was in-bounds?

Rei took her copy of the map out of her bag. It had come with the "second-chance draw" entry form.

She unfolded the piece of paper and checked. Was the wall of the school building that she could see from her current position inside the dotted-lines, or not?

She soon had her answer.

"I see."

If the inside of the school building was out-of-bounds, then that would make the outside in-bounds. What was up with that? It was like a zen riddle.

If it had been at ground level, then everyone would probably agree that it was in-bounds. But seeing it in that unreachable position, she'd automatically assumed it would be excluded, without checking whether or not it was.

But it was inside the allowed area, and was undoubtedly the yellow card.

Rei felt a little bit dizzy.

That was probably because she'd been staring upwards all this time. Although, a certain percentage of that could also be due to the shock of seeing the yellow card.

Ever since she'd heard that the treasure hunt was happening again this year, she'd spent her breaks from studying idly speculating about where Yoshino would hide her card. And the location she'd finally decided on had been way off target.

She hadn't even considered that Yoshino would hide it in this spot.

That Yoshino would hide her card in a place that Rei hadn't even thought of came as quite a shock.

And, to make matters worse, why on Earth did she have to discover it herself?

Sensing people approaching from the library, Rei hastily lowered her gaze and

folded her map.

Two girls, that looked to be first-years, chatted as they walked towards her. Naturally, they were holding that item indispensable for participants — a map.

"Ah, Rosa Foetida. Gokigenyou."

When they noticed Rei, the girls greeted her cheerfully.

"Gokigenyou. The treasure hunt seems to be going well."

"Yeah. Although I've heard the yellow card hasn't been found yet. We're heading over to the martial arts building, to see if we can find it there."

"I see."

Those girls must be fans of Yoshino. They didn't know that if they angled their faces upwards, they'd find the card they were searching for.

"Good luck."

But Rei couldn't tell them. There was value in finding it for themselves.

She let the two first-years pass then resumed walking once more. She'd be too conspicuous if she just kept standing in that spot. She thought it'd be better if she headed to the Rose Mansion and announced to Yoshino and everyone else that she'd found the yellow card.

(... Am I a masochist?)

Just then.

"Rei-sama —"

The voice came from overhead.

"Have you finished your exams for today?"

She looked up and saw a girl leaning out of a window, cheerfully brandishing a map rolled up into a bullhorn.

"__"

It was her junior in the Kendo Club, Tanuma Chisato-chan.

(Good heavens.)

The window she was leaning out of was right next to where the yellow card was stuck to the outside wall of the school building.

If Chisato-chan turned to her right, she'd undoubtedly see the card. Not just see it, she'd be able to reach out and take it.

Rei waved weakly then walked off towards the entrance.

All the while wishing she could have simply enjoyed the game like the rest of the girls.

* * *

On a related topic.

The oft-called "idiot" Rei-chan had, by this point, completely forgotten that Tanuma Chisato had won last year's treasure hunt.

Part 2

Touko wondered just what it was that she was doing.

Sitting alone at her desk, the first-year Camellia classroom seemed several times larger than usual.

Goaded into action by Sachiko-onee-sama, she'd entered the treasure hunt. On her desk was the mark of a participant — the map showing the bounds of the event.

But, right at this moment, it was nothing more than a bit of scrap paper to Touko. It had no practical use to someone that had secluded themselves in an out-of-bounds classroom.

The sounds of happy voices reached her from the hallway, but it felt like they were on a different planet. Maybe it was because the lights weren't on despite the gloom. Even so, Touko wasn't thinking about brightening the classroom.

She wasn't necessarily opposed to having the lights on in the room. It would be a simple matter to stand up and walk over to the entry, allowing her to flick the light switch. But she had no idea what she should do after that, so she didn't move.

Flicking the switch would turn on the lights and accomplish this simple goal, thereby removing this reason for staying in the room. Stepping away from the switch would open up a world of possibilities.

She could return to her seat. Or, instead of turning the lights on, she could leave the classroom.

Touko hadn't moved from her seat because once she stood up, she'd have to make that sort of decision.

If she returned to her seat after turning on the lights, what would she do then?

Continue to futilely waste time in the now well-lit classroom?

If she left the classroom, what would she do then? There's no way she'd be able to innocently enjoy the treasure hunt like the owners of those happy voices.

What if she moved to a different spot, without leaving the classroom?

Like the lockers in the back of the room, for example. She could open her locker and organize the contents. Or she could take out her coat and start getting ready to go home.

Indeed, she'd be better off heading home early. Then she could stop worrying about it all.

However.

(Are you running away?)

Sachiko-onee-sama's words stopped her. If she went home now, she would undoubtedly be running away. She was participating in the treasure hunt because she didn't want to run away, wasn't she?

She had no idea what to do.

Goaded on by Sachiko-onee-sama, she'd resolved to participate in the treasure hunt and had, initially, intended to search diligently. But her resolve had quickly withered as she looked over the other participants in the courtyard.

Listening to them chatting happily amongst themselves, and hearing their shrill cries when the future Roses appeared, Touko felt she was somehow different to them. No, not "different." It was just that it was out of character for her to be there.

Right after the start, Touko noticed that a couple of girls were following her. She smirked, remembering how Yumi-sama had also been followed a year earlier. Apparently they still considered Touko to be "someone close to Yumi-sama."

They obviously didn't know that Touko had refused Yumi-sama's rosary when she offered it at Christmas, or the abuse Touko had hurled at Yumi-sama when they had parted company last Saturday. So they were still operating with the

misperception that Touko and Yumi-sama had a close relationship.

(Misconception?)

Touko clenched her hands together above the map.

Right, that had been a misconception. Yumi-sama hadn't known anything about Touko's familial situation. So her rosary had not been offered out of pity.

(So why?)

It wasn't out of pity, so why had Yumi-sama chosen a fool like her?

"A fool?"

After saying this out loud, Touko let slip a smile.

Yumi-sama had told her to stop demeaning herself like that; to stop devaluing the person she wanted as her petite sœur.

But, after all, Touko didn't think she had that much value to begin with.

Even now, she didn't know whether she should believe Yumi-sama when she had said, "I'll be happy as long as Touko-chan is Touko-chan."

(I wonder if that still holds, after I said all those horrible things to her.)

Touko wanted to know what Yumi-sama's feelings were currently.

Thinking this, she stood up, unaware that she was doing so. The desire to track down Yumi-sama's hidden card welled up within her.

Of course, she knew that "card" did not equal "heart." Even so, Touko's thoughts were racing frantically. Where could the card be?

If it were her, where would she hide the card?

Touko drew an X on the map.

If it were her.

(There.)

Clutching the map, she flew out of the classroom.

Because she knew she'd definitely want Yumi-sama to find it.

Part 3

Touko had arrived in front of the social studies prep room.

She checked the map, just in case. It was inside the treasure hunt area.

The door wasn't locked. Touko didn't know if anyone was already in there, but she opened the door without knocking anyway.

The room was not particularly large. Despite the poor light it was plain to see that no one else was inside.

The light switch was right by the door. She didn't have to look for it, it was right in the spot she expected when she reached out her hand. Touko walked to the center of the now bright room.

Standing right in the middle, she surveyed the room. This place stored the various teaching aids used in the different social studies classes — Japanese History, World History, geography, civics, and economics.

Her gaze was immediately attracted to a large globe. It didn't look to be all that new, as it had stickers with hand-written names attached to some countries that had recently changed name. There was also rolled-up wall scrolls and old textbooks.

Touko let her gaze pass over these as she slowly walked forward, before coming to a stop in front of a set of shelves enclosed by a glass door.

There was a stack of thin booklets of varying sizes next to the atlases. It was hard to make out the lettering along their spines because they were so thin, but if she strained she could see they all had the same words written on them:

– Blank Maps

She opened the glass door and took out one of those books.

In a sense, these were forms, but none of them were filled out. They may have been made long ago, and some of the pages had brown stains, but they were all brand new as they rested here.

Touko took the next book off the shelf. After flipping through all the pages, she moved on to the next one.

Her heart was thumping. Her hope of finding the card in there was fighting with her uncertainty about what to do if it wasn't.

She ordered herself to calm down, but her fingers kept flipping through the pages of their own accord. Instead of slowing down, they sped up.

"I hate to break it to you, but it's not in here."

These words reached her just as she finished flipping through the last book.

"So it seems."

Touko returned the books to the cupboard, closed the door, and turned around. She'd known it was Noriko standing there from the first word she spoke.

"What's with the blank maps?"

Noriko asked. From Noriko's position, she'd only be able to see Touko's back, so the blank maps must have been a good guess. It didn't seem like she had a good understanding of where everything was in here because there was something special stored here.

It wasn't here. Since Noriko had said that, it was pretty certain that the red card was hidden in a different location.

So why had Noriko appeared? It was hard to imagine her tailing Touko here from the classroom. By all rights, she should be in the Rose Mansion.

"Was there something between you and Yumi-sama related to blank maps?"

Noriko questioned her again.

"__"

Touko didn't mind if Noriko knew about this, but she didn't know how to explain it.

Noriko may have interpreted her silence as a desire to not discuss this, as she changed tack with her next question.

"Do you think Yumi-sama hid her card where she did because she wanted you to find it? Is that why you're here?"

That was exactly right. As expected of Noriko. Even though she didn't know the significance of the blank maps, she'd deduced the reason that Touko had come to the social studies prep room.

"Are you here to laugh at my conceit?"

Touko fired back and Noriko looked completely serious as she denied this.

"Not at all. If you think that Yumi-sama hid her card here so that you could find it, then there's something I have to tell you."

"What—"

"You're taking Yumi-sama far too lightly."

Those words pierced Touko's heart. Sachiko-onee-sama had said something similar the other day, so maybe it was just that she couldn't block it out any more.

She'd been acting high and mighty, looking down on Yumi-sama.

"Yumi-sama cherishes you, but she's not the sort of person to hide her card somewhere where only you could find it."

She was Rosa Chinensis en bouton; she would soon be Rosa Chinensis — Noriko's eyes were saying this.

"I get it, truly. You're here in this small room because you're searching for Yumi-sama. But no matter how you look, Yumi-sama isn't in here. Yumi-sama's bigger than you imagine. So big that she can't fit in this room. That's why you can't see her, Touko."

Noriko sniffled.

"You don't understand Yumi-sama's heart."

Noriko might have been crying. But why would she be crying?

"You like Yumi-sama, right Touko? She's the only one you rely on. Why can't you trust your own instincts? You have to face her head on."



Noriko grabbed Touko's hands and squeezed them tight, like Touko had done in the courtyard after school last Saturday.

"Back then, I thought you wanted to escape from this situation. Was I wrong?"

"__"

"But if you keep yourself hidden away in this small room, you won't reach Yumi-sama's heart. If you remain how you are, you're never going to find Yumi-sama's card."

Noriko freed her hands from Touko's and wiped the back of her hand in a line across her own cheek. Then, apparently satisfied with what she'd conveyed, she walked off towards the door.

Noriko looked like she was going to leave it at that, so Touko called out to her friend's back.

"Aren't you just saying what you want to say?"

Then Noriko stopped, turned around, and said:

"I'm your friend, so I'd have to say something even if I didn't want to."

After Noriko had left, Touko looked up at the ceiling and let out a sigh.

"Good grief."

Only Noriko and her meddling could have left her feeling unsatisfied about staying in this room. Smiling slightly to herself, Touko left the social studies prep room.

There was no point stopping here, since no one she cared about what was in the room.

(What should I do when I leave?)

She'd made up her mind.

She'd go and see her.

Part 4

The second floor of the Rose Mansion was a lot more lively than when Noriko had left.

"I'm back."

The waves of people entering and exiting were pretty large. It wasn't just students that had found hints for the white card, some also stopped by to hear any news about whether or not the cards had been found.

But, judging by the state of the room, none of the cards had been found so far.

"Welcome back."

Noriko thought her return may have gone unnoticed in the hubbub of the room, but Shimako-san slipped through the crowd of guests and walked over to the door to greet her.

"Were you cold? Your nose is red."

As she said this, Shimako-san placed her hands on Noriko's cheeks. A momentary look of confusion passed across Shimako-san's face, probably because those cheeks weren't as cold as she was expecting.

"I took care of some other matters while I was out."

"I see."

That was all she had to say for Shimako-san to understand everything.

Yumi-sama was still in the same spot and chatting with the first-years that surrounded her, as though no time had passed at all. She probably still had the same amount of tea in her cup as before too. Noticing Noriko, she gave a small wave and smile.

Yoshino-sama was also looking in her direction, but she seemed to be preoccupied with the sounds of someone thumping up the stairs. Noriko too found herself instinctively looking towards the door.

It wasn't just Noriko — Shimako-san, the two boutons, Mami-sama, and all the other guests turned their attention to the door.

(Someone's finally found a card, huh?)

It was about the time when they would expect a card to be found. But it was more than just that ... those footsteps seemed far too bold, as though they didn't contain even a hint of doubt. The reaction in the room was completely different to when Noriko had entered barely a minute earlier.

"Yoshino!"

The door opened and the figure they saw was Rosa Foetida, Hasekura Rei-sama.

The girls that had been waiting in anticipation slumped down, while the girls that had resigned themselves to being beaten to a card perked up. The Rosa Foetida fans were simply surprised and excited, and over by the kettle Yoshino-sama flinched, overwhelmed by the force of Rei-sama's initial shout.

"W-what is it, Rei-chan?"

Ignoring everyone's gaze on her, Rosa Foetida strode over to Yoshino-sama. No one else called out to her, although there were plenty of conversational openers they could have used, like "Gokigenyou," or, "Have you finished your exams?"

"Here, Yoshino."

When she'd arrived in front of Yoshino-sama, Rei-sama reached into her coat pocket and pulled something out. What she placed in Yoshino-sama's palm was a piece of cardboard, folded in half.

"Huh?"

It was yellow.

"Huuuuuuuuuuh!?"

The silence in the Rose Mansion was shattered and the room was awash with shouting.

The Red Card's Outlook

Part 1

"Huuuuuuuuuh!?"

The silence in the Rose Mansion was shattered and the room was awash with shouting.

The yellow card had been found!?

And it was in the hands of her sœur, Rosa Foetida!

The overexcited participants would normally have spotted the slight problem with that right away, but in their current state they seemed to have completely missed it.

(Calm down, everyone.)

Yumi said inside her head.

Rei-sama wasn't permitted to participate directly today because she'd entered into the "second-chance draw."

From her seat, Yumi couldn't see what Rei-sama had presented to Yoshino-san, so she couldn't say for certain, but she thought it had to be something other than the real card.

Of course, she didn't know what the misleading card was, or why Rei-sama would be carrying it.

(Wait, hold on a minute.)

She couldn't completely rule out the possibility of it being the real thing. The "second-chance draw" entrants weren't physically prevented from doing anything. One of the requirements was that they couldn't participate in the event, but that didn't mean that such a thing was impossible.

The reality was that Rei-sama was here.

In the event that a card was found during the main event by someone entered into the second-chance draw, the result would be void.

(But.)

What if Rei-sama had forgotten about that?

Even if she remembered it, she may have wanted to be the one to find Yoshino-san's card even though it meant her disqualification.

(It's possible, especially for Rei-sama.)

She usually conducted herself with good sense, but when Yoshino-san was involved the blood went to her head and she couldn't make rational decisions.

– This was the train of thought that flowed through Yumi's brain in the five or six seconds until the truth was revealed.

". . . R-"

Yoshino-san's voice brought Yumi back to the present.

(R?)

When Yoshino-san couldn't get the words out, Yumi looked at her to see what was going on. Yoshino-san's face was bright red and her body was rigid, but trembling slightly.

(Th-this is . . .)

Then, after reaching critical mass, Yoshino-san exploded in the usual manner.

"Rei-chan, you idiot!"

"Yo—"

Rei-sama had started to say "Yoshino," but sadly she wasn't allowed to make it to the end.

"Idiot, idiot, idiot! What the heck were you thinking?"

Rei-sama was drowned out by Yoshino-san's anger.

"Yoshino-san, you don't have to keep saying 'Idiot.'"

Shimako-san tried to intervene, but her words weren't enough to calm Yoshino-san. Yumi understood this, but decided to sit tight and watch how things proceeded due to the number of people surrounding the Yellow Rose sœurs.

(Ahh.)

Everyone else may have heard rumors about it, but it was obviously quite a shock for them to see Yoshino-san verbally abusing her Onee-sama first hand. Yoshino-san usually played nice, but when her anger reached its peak she completely and utterly forgot about the sœur system — and the onee-sama's place within it.

Alas, the public image of last year's "Best Sœur" award winners, the Yellow Rose sœurs, was crumbling. But, in truth, it looked like the fans of Rei-sama and Yoshino-san took more damage than the pair themselves.

After being around her for the last two years, Yumi knew that this was about the time when Yoshino-san would want to stop, but would still feel unsatisfied if she stopped now.

Sachiko-sama also seemed to understand this, as she continued to watch from her seat. She was probably thinking that they weren't finished just yet.

Unfortunately for the White Rose sœurs, who were frantically trying to smooth things over, the Red Rose sœurs were united in not intervening — in word or deed.

(What's wrong with that?)

One of Yoshino-san's favorite sayings was that a fight between sœurs couldn't harm a fly.

Sachiko-sama flashed a smile when she noticed Yumi's gaze. Yumi may have just been imagining things, but it felt like a grin. She was a bit sensitive to her Onee-sama's expressions because of her earlier declaration about "waiting for Rosa Chinensis en bouton to reveal her faults." Simply put, Yumi was scared.

"What's wrong with calling an idiot an idiot?"

Yoshino-san continued with her rant about Rei-sama.

"Calm down, okay?"

Mami-san jumped in, desperately trying to resolve the situation.

"How could I calm down? What do you think this idiot just handed me?"

"What is it?"

From the bottom of her heart, Yumi wanted to know the answer to Mami-san's question too. It almost certainly wasn't the real yellow card, but —

"Why don't you let everyone see?"

At Yoshino-san's urging, Rei-sama reluctantly handed the piece of paper to Mami-san. Even from Yumi's position, she could tell it wasn't the real yellow card. It had a bit more of a reddish tinge than the real card's lemon yellow, making it more of a dandelion yellow or a bright golden-yellow. But more than that, the size was clearly wrong. It was about two-thirds the size of the actual card, just small enough to fit in a pocket.

"Pardon me."

Having been handed the piece of cardboard, Mami-san unfolded it and read out the words written there.

""Valentine's Chocolate Request Form'... ?"

Mami-san tried to sound detached as she read it, but by the time she got to

"Form" her face and tone were clearly saying, "What the heck is this?"

Valentine's Chocolate Request Form. Mami-san wasn't the only one puzzled by that; everyone's gaze shifted to Rei-sama, seeking an explanation.

"Well, you see, I've been so snowed under with entrance exams this year that I wasn't able to bake her a cake."

Rei-sama hesitantly admitted. What happened to the spirit she'd shown when she came through the door?

"So I was thinking that I should make her something as soon as I was accepted into college, and—"

"And?"

Yoshino-san forced a smile as she asked. Rei-sama seemed to regain her nerve as she spoke, apparently not noticing Yoshino-san's expression and mistakenly thinking that she'd exhausted her anger with that barrage of "idiot."

"And since I'm doing this for her, I should ask her what she wants, and make something great. Since I'm making her wait, you know . . . I should make something incredible, right?"

That last word, "Right?" and the accompanying impish smile pressed down directly on Yoshino-san's "anger" button.

"I've told you, that's not the sort of thing someone studying for college entrance exams should be thinking about!"

Yoshino-san slammed her left fist hard on the nearby tabletop.

"Uh."

Startled by the noise, Rei-sama jumped back.

"You're taking entrance exams, so act like it, and focus on the tests. Don't come to school on days when you have an exam. Don't show up at these events. Go home and prepare for your next exam. Don't worry about chocolate."

As she spoke, Yoshino-san raised her right index finger high in the air before lowering it to point at Rei-sama, who leaned back.

"Entrance exam students usually lose sight of their surroundings because their head is so full of test material. But what are you doing? Filling your mind with frivolities! You need to stop paying so much attention to what's going on around you. Then you wouldn't have bothered with this. Gah, I'm so angry right now!"

Yoshino-san stamped her foot, then crouched down and hung her head.

It looked like Yoshino-san's anger at "Rei-chan" for getting carried away had mixed with some self-loathing at the way she'd flared up about it, and turned sour.

"I understand."

Shimako-san made her way over to the pair and placed her hand on Yoshino-san's shoulder.

"You wanted Rei-sama to say nothing because you were going to give her something, right Yoshino-san?"

"That's right. But there's no point in that now."

"Uh . . ."

Leaving behind a bewildered Rei-sama, Yoshino-san walked over to the corner of the room, picked up the large paper bag she'd left there earlier, and returned to her original position.

The bag had the label "Hasekura Rei" on it and was filled with numerous smaller bags and prettily wrapped boxes.

Yumi remembered seeing something like this before. Last year, a similar bag of presents addressed to Rei-sama had been given to her petite sœur, Yoshino-san.

Yoshino-san placed the bag in front of Rei-sama.

"You know, I thought you'd be so busy studying that you'd forget about Valentine's Day chocolates. So I thought it'd be a burden to you if I gave you

chocolates."

". . . So you didn't make any."

Shimako-san murmured, and Yoshino-san snarled at her friend.

"No."

Apparently, her deduction was mistaken this time.

"I hid it in this mountain of chocolate, so I wouldn't have to hand it over directly. I was being meek."

Although a meek person wouldn't show their hand so brazenly. If this were pointed out to Yoshino-san, she'd likely say, "Stop poking holes in everything," so Yumi remained silent and watched on.

Yoshino-san stuck her hand into the bag and pulled out a single box. She held it out to Rei-sama and said:

"Here. There's no point in hiding it now."

So rude.

Regardless of the circumstances, this was a petite sœur giving her Onee-sama chocolates. Even if she wasn't willing to add any words of gratitude, she could at least look affectionate as she handed them over, otherwise she'd just be inviting divine retribution.

However.

"Yoshino. . ."

Rei-sama was teary-eyed despite her shabby treatment.

It may have been Yoshino-san's saying, but "Rei-chan" truly was an idiot. She seemed happy just to receive something from Yoshino-san, no matter what it was or the circumstances around it.

(Habits built up over decades weren't so easy to change, huh.)

Part amazed and part deeply moved, Yumi watched the Yellow Rose soeurs.

"Do you know what's inside?"

"Uwah!"

Hearing that voice right next to her, Yumi almost jumped out of her chair.

Most of the first-years had left their seats, drawn in by the confusion over the yellow card's discovery, and at some point during all this Sachiko-sama had moved to the empty seat next to Yumi.

"What's uwah?"

"Ah, pardon me, Onee-sama."

Being stared at from across the table was scary, but having her close like this was also nerve-wracking. Although it wasn't like Sachiko-sama was going to order her, "Tell me where your card is hidden," so all she had to do was remain calm and not reveal her faults. But her opponent was her Onee-sama and, frankly, Yumi didn't have much confidence that she'd be able to do that.

"I was asking about the type of chocolates that Yoshino-chan was giving Rei. Or had you not heard either?"

"Ah, I heard."

Because unlike Shimako-san, Yumi was in the same class as Yoshino-san.

"She melted down store-bought chocolate and reset it in molds."

"Oh, is that all? She was acting so proud I imagined it was some laborious epic."

Sachiko-sama was a bit surprised.

"But according to Yoshino-san, this year's is a special version."

In truth, Yoshino-san had also taken the easy path of making "reset chocolates" by melting down and resetting store-bought chocolate last year. But she'd been annoyed at doing the same thing again this year, since she thought it meant she'd made no progress.

"A special version. . . ?"

"The gimmick is that there's five different flavors to enjoy, depending on where you bite."

"That's incredible. How do you think she did it?"

Ah, Sachiko-sama's interest had been piqued. But it didn't seem like she was interested in making something like that herself, she was just curious about how the confectionery amateur Yoshino-san would make a special version of reset chocolates for the pro Rei-sama.

"She bought five different flavors of chocolate, then melted them down one at a time and poured each one as a layer into the mold so they wouldn't mix."

Yumi was gesticulating as she talked, and made it this far into her explanation when Sachiko-sama exclaimed, "Ha!" It looked like she hadn't meant to laugh that loudly, as she quickly covered her mouth with her hand — apparently embarrassed by her unintentionally raucous laugh.

"That's incredible. Just like Yoshino-chan."

Sachiko-sama whispered, paying attention to her surroundings.

"I know, right?"

But everyone's attention was still focused on the Yellow Rose sœurs, so no one paid any mind to the Red Rose sœurs.

While one may have expected Rei-sama's teary-eyed "Yoshino. . ." to gradually reduce Yoshino-san's anger, reality was not that kind.

"And what were you thinking with that 'request card'? You just had to make it out of yellow cardboard, didn't you?"

Technically, it was a "Valentine's Chocolate Request Form," but Rei-sama didn't correct her. Smart move.

"Well, I mean, yellow's sort of been our default color for the last two, three years. Birthday cards, handmade wrapping paper, even your new bike. You're

always saying that we're the Yellow Roses, so it has to be yellow."

"You still have to consider the time and place. Of course it's going to cause a commotion if you take out a yellow piece of paper that looks like the treasure hunt card in this situation."

It looked like she was being put on trial for intentionally misleading everyone and causing a panic. But Rei-sama quickly picked up on something Yoshino-san had said.

"Oh, but I did find the card."

"Huh?"

She said it so smoothly that it almost seemed like she'd said, "I didn't," instead of, "I did."

"But as a non-participant, I couldn't very well pick it up. So I pretended not to see it."

So she hadn't lost sight of the consequences of picking up the card, after all. Yumi mentally apologized to Rei-sama for doubting her earlier.

"It was so annoying to find it and not be able to pick it up. So I turned my energy to this "Valentine's Chocolate Request Form." Even though I didn't have the right to claim the card, I still had the right to bake you the cake you wanted."

Naturally, no one was listening to her words of devotion.

No matter what she said, it would have been lost in the face of the impact of finding out there was someone that had found a card standing right there. To top it off, Yoshino-san's anger had flared again when she heard this news.

"What color was it?"

Yoshino-san asked, quite deliberately.

"Yellow. It was your card, Yoshino."

Judging by her laugh, it looked like she was telling the truth. Rei-sama really had

found the yellow card.

"Where? Where was it?"

Yoshino-san's fans recovered from their shock at seeing Yoshino-san's true nature and questioned Rei-sama.

"You'll have to find it yourself."

Just like Shimako-san earlier, she wasn't going to answer their questions.

"At least give us a hint. Like, was it in a school building, or outside? You can do that, right, Rosa Foetida?"

"Heheheh."

Rei-sama laughed happily, buoyed by the sense of superiority that came from knowing where the yellow card was.

"Going by what she said, it must have been somewhere out in the open. Rei-sama came here from the front gate, so it must be somewhere along that path —"

Even if they stayed in the Rose Mansion, they weren't likely to get any better information than that. The treasure hunt participants that had been thronging around Rei-sama (primarily Yoshino-san's fans), quickly turned around and scrambled for the exit.

"Too bad."

Standing there was a solitary second-year student.

"The yellow card is right here."

Tanuma Chisato-san said, holding the yellow card up next to her face, and looking eminently satisfied.

Part 2

This card had the right color and size, and was undoubtedly the real one.

The definitive proof was the slightly larger plastic bag — with loose strips of tape still attached — that she was also holding aloft.

The card had been placed in a plastic covering, otherwise it may have been damaged when it was ripped off the wall.

So, all the promoters understood that Chisato-san had taken the plastic bag and card from the external wall of the staff room.

"Pardon me."

Even so, Mami-san took the card to confirm this, as a formality. She looked at the front, turned it over and looked at the back, then unfolded it and looked inside. Then she made a gesture as though she were adjusting a pair of glasses, even though she wasn't wearing any.

"This card is genuine."

She handed down her judgment.

The girls that had been watching on with bated breath let out a collective, "Oooh." For some reason, the voices seemed more happy than disappointed when compared to last time, perhaps because the earlier feint had drawn some of that away.

"Please state your grade, class, and name," Mami-san asked, even though she knew all that without having to ask. She was just doing it for form's sake.

"Second-year Chrysanthemum class, Tanuma Chisato."

Chisato-san presented her student ID card to Mami-san, who compared it to the

entry slip signed by "Tanuma Chisato" that Noriko-chan handed to her, and then nodded her head.

"Tanuma Chisato-san. I acknowledge that you were the finder of the yellow card. Congratulations."

Mami-san held out her hand. Chisato-san gave her a firm handshake and said, "Thank you."

And then.

"I knew it. You found it, huh?" Rei-sama said, watching the proceedings with a conflicted expression.

"Oh, thanks for before."

Noticing Rei-sama's gaze, Chisato-san greeted her with a smile. It looked as though they'd run into each other somewhere earlier today.

"I wasn't sure if it was going to be found, but if it was, you were the only that could have done it, Chisato-chan."

"After you walked off, I looked to my right and there it was."

"Well, not much I could have done about that then."

"But I'd say about half of it was thanks to you, Rei-sama."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

Rei-sama and Chisato-san got swept up in their own private conversation.

"Say, what's all this about?" Sachiko-sama asked. Unlike Yumi, who knew the card's hiding spot, she couldn't really understand how their meeting was related to the location of the card, or the significance of Chisato-san looking to her right. To the regular participants, it would all sound like gibberish.

"Chisato-san, we're going announce it at the post-event assembly, but if you don't mind, could you give everyone here a sneak peak? Where was the yellow

card hidden?"

Mami-san proposed and Chisato-san happily agreed.

"Ah, sure. The card was. . . ."

Everyone's attention was centered on Chisato-san. Overwhelmed by the atmosphere, Yumi heard an imaginary drum-roll echoing in her head, despite knowing the answer already.

"Stuck to the staff room wall."

Hearing this, the students that had been waiting for the answer all exclaimed, "Wha~!?" The students that had been partaking in the Rose Mansion tea-party for the duration of the event pulled out their maps to check, while those that had spent some time outside searching didn't need to look at their maps.

"But the staff room is out of bounds!"

Scattered booing erupted around the room, since they weren't supposed to go searching in that place.

Yoshino-san had been silent for a while, but then she softly muttered, "The inside was."

At some point she'd sat down in an empty chair, and was looking at the commotion about the yellow card's discovery as though it was someone else's business, even though this sort of "foul-play" reaction was the only realistic outcome. But the way she was resting her chin in her hands and looking off into the distance seemed to indicate she wasn't in a particularly good mood. Presumably, she wasn't overjoyed about having her card found.

"The inside?"

"All she said was the staff room wall, that could mean a couple of things," Mami-san added, in place of Yoshino-san, who'd lapsed back into silence as though she were sulking.

She then continued her explanation over an unfolded map, by comparing rooms to boxes and saying that if the inside was out-of-bounds, the outside was in-

bounds.

"So that means. . . ?"

"My apologies. To be more precise, it was on the staff room's external wall."

Chisato-san amended her statement.

"Wha~t!"

People tended to think of things at eye-height, so when they'd been told it was on the staff room wall their first impression was that it was on an internal wall, but when they heard that was wrong they seemed to assume it was on the wall facing the hallway.

The staff room was on the second floor. It would be hard to see for someone that wasn't four or five meters tall. It would probably be easier to spot at a distance from the school building, but, unfortunately, the narrow path to the adjacent library passed beneath the staff room window. So it would be hard to spot unless someone intentionally stopped in the middle of that path and looked up.

Yoshino-san had taken advantage of that blind-spot. She'd chosen that location because she wanted the participants to be annoyed, thinking, "But I passed under that so many times," and because she wanted to say, "The inside was," to those that objected by saying the staff room was out-of-bounds.

But Chisato-san had found it. And Rei-sama had let it go because she didn't have the right to pick it up.

The participants that had been booing had no choice but to accept Mami-san's explanation.

Now that the commotion had died down, the still sulking Yoshino-san stood up from her seat. With a sour look showing her obvious displeasure, she strode forwards. Instinctively, the other participants made a path in front of her. Finally, she came to a stop in front of the winner, Tanuma Chisato-san.

"Congratulations, Chisato-san."

Yoshino-san forced a smile.

"Two years in a row is quite impressive."

Holding that forced smile all the way to the end, her thoughts were probably along the lines of, "How could someone like you find it?" But she didn't say them out loud. Remarkably mature.

"Thank you. The hiding place was brilliant, and very fitting for you, Yoshino-san."

Chisato-san smiled. Unlike Yoshino-san, her smile was genuine.

"What do you mean by that?"

One of Yoshino-san's eyebrows twitched upwards.

"I said it was brilliant, and that's a compliment. Better off leaving it at that, don't you think?"

Chisato-san wasn't afraid of Yoshino-san. Instead, she seemed to relish provoking her and watching the reaction.

"You wanna fight?"

Yoshino-san didn't say this out loud, but Yumi didn't overlook her mouthing it. On second-thought, she decided to overlook it. To maintain the dignity of Lillian's students.

"By the way."

After taking a deep breath and recovering some of her composure, Yoshino-san put her fake smile back on and questioned Chisato-san.

"Are you aware that the bonus prize is a ticket for a half-day date with me?"

"Yeah."

Of course she'd be aware, she'd exercised that right last year.

"Then what do you think about going on a date with me?"

Yoshino-san dropped her fake smile and stared at Chisato-san. Apparently she

thought that Chisato-san wouldn't have considered this, even though she was holding the winning card.

"Obviously," Chisato-san announced loudly. "I'm really looking forward to it."

She was even more of a warrior than anyone had expected.

Part 3

". . . Um, Rosa Chinensis?"

Haltingly, a group of first-years approached her.

"You still haven't moved yet?"

The time had just passed 4:30 p.m., but Rosa Chinensis still hadn't left the Rose Mansion. There were only ten minutes left in the game.

"Yes."

Sachiko-sama smiled, then sipped on her third cup of tea. Then she repeated the sentence she'd said countless times before.

"But you don't have to worry about me. You can go off and search on your own if you want."

There had been a bit of a commotion when Yoshino-san's card was found, but things had mostly settled down since then. Participants were still coming and going from the Rose Mansion, but the number of people present had definitely risen. The five first-years that had been stuck to Sachiko-sama like suckerfish since the beginning of the event were all still there, but they seemed to be holding their breath as they tried to sound out Rosa Chinensis.

Since the yellow card had already been found, Yoshino-san's fans had no reason to go outside and search, but the last few hectic minutes with the one-sided quarrel between the Yellow Rose sœurs and the announcement of the discovery of the yellow card had left them exhausted. Perhaps that was the reason why it was so quiet.

Eventually they ran out of teacups, and newly arrived guests were now being served tea in disposable cups. There weren't enough chairs to go around either, so they were standing like at a cocktail party.

Sachiko-sama drank the last of her tea then slowly stood up. The first-years surrounding her hurriedly stood up too since it looked like she was finally making her move. Except . . .

"You girls can have these seats if you'd like."

She didn't leave the room. She instead called out to a group of girls over by the window and offered them the seats. The six seats around Yumi that had been vacated were now filled with a new cast of characters.

"Yumi-sama, do you think your red card will be found?"

Yumi smiled as she answered that question.

"Well, I'm not sure."

She'd been asked the same question numerous times since the treasure hunt started. But to everyone that asked, it was their first time asking.

"But you must be hoping that your onee-sama, Rosa Chinensis, finds it, right?"

"Not at all, I'm just waiting in anticipation to see if anyone finds it."

As she spoke, Yumi glanced at her onee-sama. Sachiko-sama was standing not that far away from Yumi, still surrounded by those first-years. If things kept going like this, they'd reach the time limit without her going out searching. Feeling conflicted, Yumi looked at her and Sachiko-sama met her gaze.

Sachiko-sama grinned. Yumi quickly looked away.

Sachiko-sama probably wouldn't be able to read anything from her eyes . . . but just in case. The eyes couldn't say as much as the mouth, but in Yumi's case, even if she didn't say anything aloud it was possible her eye movements or comically expressive face could let a hint or two slip.

"What? Is that really true?"

The first-years around Sachiko-sama were raising their voices in excitement. All the girls within about 1.5 meters of her were expressing their disbelief.

"It's true. I haven't pinpointed it precisely, but I know the general area where the card is hidden."

Yumi caught the key words, "I know . . . where . . . card is hidden," and her heart pounded in her chest.

(Calm down, calm down.)

While taking care not to let her agitation show, Yumi peeked over at Sachiko-sama. It was possible she was looking to see how Yumi reacted to that statement. If she hadn't thought of a location with only ten minutes left, then it was entirely possible that she'd adopt a strategy of doing whatever it took.

"How could you know where it is when you haven't gone anywhere?"

The obvious question was thrown at Sachiko-sama.

"Hints."

"Hints?"

(Huh?)

Yumi had the same look of confusion as the first-years a short distance away.

"You didn't have to go out and search. Just by being in this room the hints came to you, right?"

After listening to this much of the conversation, Yumi realized that she had been mistaken.

Sachiko-sama must have said that she knew where Shimako-san's card was.

"By hints, you mean those cards with 'Ku' and 'No' written on them?"

"Exactly."

"Although it wasn't just letters, there was also the drawing of a rabbit."

Then Sachiko-sama smiled and said, "See? You were able to gain information even though you didn't leave the room." It looked as though Sachiko-sama had

managed to infer the location of the white card by piecing together the words from the hints.

"Still, it's amazing that you could memorize all those hints in amongst all this noise and confusion."

"Not at all," Sachiko-sama opened up her student notebook. "I wrote them down. There's only been six so far, but I think I've probably got it figured out."

"Huh, so, where is it?"

Naturally, even the girl that asked the question wasn't expecting it to be answered — it was just for form's sake.

"Sachiko-sama's incredible."

Yoshino-san had made her way over to Yumi's side and whispered this in her ear.

"I was watching her from behind and when she said, 'I think I've figured it out,' she was tapping her pen on a spot on the map. That spot was, you know —"

"The hiding place?" Yumi asked for confirmation and Yoshino-san nodded.

"Near there. I don't think she would have been tapping on that spot just by chance, or as a guess."

Near there was good enough. If she knew the approximate location, then it wouldn't take her long to find it if she actually went out there.

"Then shouldn't you hurry? There's not much time left."

The first-years surrounding Sachiko-sama tried to lead her over to the door like ushers. With the time limit approaching, the entire mood of the room had shifted to impatience. These girls were getting excited; if they couldn't find a card, then they at least wanted to be present when one was found.

"I suppose I could, but. . . ."

Sachiko-sama didn't end up moving after all.

"It's not the red card?" Shimako-san smiled.

"Right. No offense to you, Shimako, but I've been aiming for Yumi's card from the beginning. If I went out and got your card now, the game would be over for me when I returned."

If she did this she'd have to give up on Yumi's card. Sachiko-sama was saying that even though there was only a little time remaining, she wanted to spend that on the red card.

"Onee-sama . . ."

It was a killer line and a clarion call. Yumi felt compelled to run over to Sachiko-sama and embrace her tightly, but forced herself to refrain. Sachiko-sama gazed intently at her. It may have been Yumi's imagination, but she looked slightly confused.

(Don't tell me she suspects. . . ?)

It would all be over if she dove into her onee-sama's chest. She had to ensure she didn't undo all the meticulous care she'd taken up until this point.

"But you still don't know where the red card is, right?"

Sachiko-sama shifted her gaze away from Yumi when a first-year asked her this.

"Or do you already know where it is and you're planning on making a mad dash for it right at the end?"

As she listened, Yumi thought, "There's no way that's true." But even so, Sachiko-sama's reaction was unexpected.

"Hehehe."

("Hehehe"?)

Why had she laughed so knowingly? Yumi instinctively made eye contact with Mami-san. There's no way. There's no way —

"Ohh, I see. So you know where the red card is too?"

The first-years were getting excited. In contrast, Sachiko-sama smiled serenely,

like a calm ocean. "More or less. I have an idea of the general location of it."

"No way . . ." Yumi blurted out without thinking, although she didn't think her onee-sama was just making it all up. But she couldn't see what mistake she'd made. She hadn't let any hints slip from her mouth, nor had she looked in the direction of the card's hiding place. But for her onee-sama's expression to be so full of confidence. . . .

"I said it before, didn't I? By watching what happens around her, eventually Rosa Chinensis en bouton would reveal her faults." If this were a manga, the word "Foresight" would be written in the background behind Sachiko-sama in bold letters. "Staying here was the right decision."

Now the background had changed to "Sticking to her Principles." It would then undoubtedly shift to "Following Through on her Word," or "Majestic," before eventually ending at "Outstanding Beauty." Basically, Yumi was flustered and seeking refuge in these illusions.

Sachiko-sama probably did know where the card was. In that case, it wouldn't be long before the red card ended up in her hand.

"So why aren't you going to get the card?"

That was the obvious next question after hearing that she knew where the card was hidden.

"I've decided that, as a handicap, I won't make my move until the last five minutes."

Sachiko-sama looked at the clock. Everyone instinctively followed her gaze. The last five minutes was only three minutes away.

"Umm, why. . . ?"

"Because being Yumi's onee-sama gives me numerous advantages over everyone else."

That's why she imposed this handicap of waiting until the last five minutes on herself. Even though she'd already seen out the handicap of starting five minutes later than everyone else.

"But what if someone finds it before then. . . ?"

"Naturally, I'll graciously concede defeat."

"Really?"

On hearing that, Sachiko-sama's retinue were split into two different groups.

"Okay, so the hiding place must be within a five-minute round trip from here."

One group came to the conclusion that even though they didn't know where it was, it must be close, so they started looking. Some flew out of the room while others stayed and looked around inside — under the table, inside the containers by the sink, and so on.

As for the other group, "The last five minutes. . . ."

Those that didn't care about leftovers and just wanted to see that moment come quickly gathered closer around Sachiko-sama. For now, the participants that weren't aiming for the red card watched the hands on the clock move. Only two minutes until 4:35 p.m. What would be the state of play in two minutes' time? Would someone find the card in those two minutes, beating out Sachiko-sama? Or would Sachiko-sama swing into action because nobody had found the card? Yumi wasn't sure if she could actually hear it or not, but she sensed the soft ticking of the second hand as it moved around the clock.

She tried to recall how fast a second was. It felt like it should have been a bit faster, but on the other hand she wasn't sure that it should be that fast either. She hadn't had much experience of waiting like this, where she was conscious of every second ticking down.

It was so quiet that she could hear the sound of someone gulping. Even the girls that had been searching around the room had stopped with about a minute to go, and instead were looking back and forth between Sachiko-sama and a clock. Those that didn't wear a watch, and those that habitually had their watch set a few minutes fast, were looking at the watches of their neighbors. The Rose Mansion had a wall-mounted clock, but for some reason everyone wanted to check the time on the nearest device.

"There's five minutes remaining," Mami-san quietly informed Sachiko-sama.

The start and end time for today's event was based solely on Mami-san's watch. Because of this, she had called the official time service and set her watch to the correct time, down to the second, this morning. So when Mami-san's watch read five minutes to go, it meant there was only five minutes left in the event.

"I see," Sachiko-sama nodded.

Everyone watched on, wondering what she was going to do. Most of the participants were looking somewhere between Sachiko-sama and the door. But Yumi knew that Sachiko-sama would absolutely not be walking in that direction.

"Yumi."

Her name was called.

"Ah, yes?"

Was this the feeling of a frog being watched by a snake? At any rate, while she did manage to respond, her body had stiffened and she couldn't move at all.

Sachiko-sama slowly walked towards her.

Yumi's stiffness had faded, but now she was trembling. Her arms and legs were shivering, and her heart was pounding, causing the blood to race around her body. What was with this reaction?

Sachiko-sama drew closer, cutting through the murmuring onlookers. She was full of intensity, to the point of being overbearing. The first-years that had been seated on either side of Yumi left their seats, probably scared off.

But Yumi couldn't run away. She had to stay put and judge Sachiko-sama's guess on the card's whereabouts.

Sachiko-sama finally arrived right beside Yumi and grinned. It was the smile of someone who'd already won.

"Yumi," Sachiko-sama called her name once more before issuing the following order.

"Stand up."

". . . Huh?"

"Come on, stand up, off your seat."

There was nothing more she could do. Game, set, match. Still seated, Yumi moved her chair back from the table.

But then, right at that moment, sound and vibrations flooded into the room from outside. It wasn't a cute little clattering or creaking, but a loud thumping.

"What's going on?"

Sachiko-sama turned towards the door. It was obvious someone was pounding up the old stairs.

But what was with that sound? Their visitor was either in a real hurry, or panicked.

"Don't tell me the white card's been found. . . ?"

All the people that had been watching the Red Rose sœurs turned their gaze to the door. Yumi's rear had been hovering over the chair, but she sat back down.

Bang!

The door was flung open with the same force that the stairs had been climbed.

"Yumi-sama!"

Someone completely unexpected had appeared.

– Matsudaira Touko.

"Touko-cha—"

Touko-chan's breathing was ragged, like she'd just killed a bear or some other large animal, and she looked at Yumi with something akin to a scowl. Her trademark ringlets were a shadow of their usual glory. It may have been Yumi's eyes playing tricks on her, but in this cold February weather, it looked like there was steam rising from Touko-chan's uniform.

If Sachiko-sama had been as scary as a snake earlier, then Touko-chan was a demon.

Touko-chan seemed to be ignoring everyone else in the room besides Yumi. She looked straight ahead as she strode forwards. The floor wasn't as worn out as the staircase, but the wooden boards still made a decent sound.

Clomp, clomp.

(Didn't she pride herself on her ability to walk silently?)

It was strange how Yumi thought of something so trivial at that moment. The typical thoughts of, "Why is Touko-chan here?" or, "Why does she look so angry?" didn't cross her mind at all.

Clomp, clomp.

(That's an incredible sound for someone so light.)

Under Touko-chan's ferocious advance, Sachiko-sama took a step back from her position beside Yumi. Touko-chan came to a stop in that opening and quickly bowed.

"Yumi-sama. Please forgive my rudeness up to now."



"Huh!?"

Hang on, what was happening here? There had been some thumping and then some clomping. But how was that related to asking for forgiveness?

"In addition . . ." Touko-chan temporarily raised her head from her deep bow.

"Yumi-sama, won't you take me as your petite sœur?"

Yumi had absolutely no idea what was going on.

". . . Huh?"

But she had been so surprised that she'd instinctively stood up.

"Ah!"

Where had that last exclamation come from?

Just as the red card made its appearance atop the chair cushion that Yumi had been sitting on, the alarm on Mami-san's watch went off, informing everyone that the game had ended.

Map Stroll

Early February, after school.

Yumi, Shimako-san, and Yoshino-san were about to take a stroll around the school grounds together. The three treasure "hiders" for the Valentine's Day treasure hunt were doing the homework that Mami-san from the Newspaper Club had assigned to them a couple of days earlier.

"By the next meeting, you each need to decide roughly where you want to hide your card."

It had been set as individual homework, but they had all exchanged glances when they heard this.

If they all showed up at the next meeting having individually selected a spot, that didn't necessarily mean it would all be settled quickly. For instance, what if they all decided that the first floor of the Rose Mansion would be a good hiding spot? There's no way they'd have a treasure hunt with all the treasure concentrated in such a small area.

So they decided to do the homework as a group assignment. Basically, this was a strategy meeting.

They started by assembling in the Rose Mansion, spreading out a map of the school, and gathering around it. Three mechanical pencils — Rosa Gigantea, Rosa Foetida en bouton and Rosa Chinensis en bouton.

"Well, let's head out."

The trio set off from the Rose Mansion. Despite the cold February weather, they didn't need coats.

Because they were about to take a stroll around the map.

Meandering

Part 1

"First of all, does anyone have anywhere that they really want to hide their card?" Yoshino-san asked. They'd just left the Rose Mansion but were milling around, unsure of where to attack first. "If so, we can decide on that spot first and it'll make it easier to think about the other cards. I think they should all be hidden in different locations and in different ways, as much as possible."

"That's true," Shimako-san agreed, and Yumi nodded too. Since the purpose of the strategy meeting was to avoid having too high a concentration of cards in any one area, that was a fundamental principle.

"Yeah, but there's nowhere I'm dead set on just yet."

So, for now, they had a look around the courtyard which served as the starting line. Yumi thought that they would come up with ideas as they surveyed the various locations.

"How about you, Shimako-san? Last year, you came up with the committee notice board pretty quickly, didn't you?"

Shimako-san was the only veteran, having done this last year, so they were trying to draw upon her experiences. In other words, a plan to draw inspiration from history.

"Yes, it was relatively easy. Sachiko-sama told me she immediately thought of the old greenhouse too," Shimako-san answered, raising her gaze slightly.

"And Rei-chan?" Yoshino-san asked without a moment's delay. Their relationship was so close that she could have read this from Rei-sama's diary, but apparently the opportunity hadn't arisen for them to discuss the matter.

"She was initially thinking about hiding it in the martial arts building, but she said there weren't any good hiding places there."

"I see. The dojo is fairly empty and entering the changing or equipment rooms would be pretty intimidating for someone that isn't a member of a martial arts club."

Yumi had thought that they were loitering around inside the courtyard together, but Yoshino-san had dashed off alone and was surveying the interior of the martial arts building.

"Ah, sorry." Realizing that she'd lost the other two, Yoshino-san took out an old, surplus printout (the Yamayurikai regularly reused these as notepaper) which she'd used earlier and drew a quick sketch of the martial arts building on the back. The map they were seated around did have the martial arts building, but all it showed was the top-down view of the building's shape.

"Oh . . . so that's what it looks like inside. I see."

The martial arts building was a difficult place for students not studying martial arts to step foot in. Yumi had been coming to this academy for thirteen years now and had been inside it a grand total of two or three times. It was probably even less familiar to Shimako-san, who had entered into Lillian's Girls Academy in middle school. But looking at Yoshino-san's rough sketch seemed to stir up some memories of last year's planning meeting within her.

"I seem to recall Rei-sama briefly considered hiding it beneath the Judo Club's tatami mats. Wouldn't it be hard to find if it were hidden there?"

"Yeah, probably."

"I think she rejected it because she didn't want the treasure hunt to come down to that sort of manual labor, which was quite kind of her."

"Hmm."

That indifferent response from Yoshino-san showed that she didn't consider that kind Rei-sama had rejected the notion of manual labor out of concern for her.

(She's not considering it, huh.)

Last year, after looking through the books on cooking and knitting in the library, Yoshino-san had gone to the martial arts building and participated in upending

the tatami mats. If she'd understood Rei-sama's heart, she obviously wouldn't have taken part in such a pointless endeavor.

"And, lastly, the martial arts building and the old greenhouse were too close together, so she decided to hide it in a different location," Shimako-san said.

"So, the library? I guess it's a safe distance away."

Yoshino-san drew a triangle connecting the three points on the map. Technically, the committee notice board wasn't on the first floor, so it would be on a different map, but she used the spot it would be if it was on the first floor. "I don't have anything definite in mind, but I've got an idea of what I want from my hiding spot," Yoshino-san said, tracing along the triangle.

"What's that?"

"I want to astonish everyone. I want them to be annoyed."

"Huh?"

"Because I was incredibly annoyed when I participated last year."

Yoshino-san had a bit of a history here: not only had she struck out on all the places she looked last year, but someone from the group that had been following her around had found the yellow card and won the half-day date with Rei-sama. Despite her valiant struggle to eventually arrive at more or less the correct location — the library books — she'd seen the card slip away from her grasp. Even though a year had passed, the memories of it were still enough to make Yoshino-san grind her teeth in frustration.

"While I had the experience of hiding a card last year, you and Yumi-san had the experience of searching for them. I'm sure that different perspective will help with thinking up hiding places."

As Shimako-san said, it was good that they were bringing these different perspectives together. As the saying goes, if you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the results of a hundred battles.

"So, if you want to annoy people, how would you do it?" Yumi asked, and Yoshino-san shrugged her shoulders.

"Like I said, I don't have anything definite in mind. That's still to come."

Yoshino-san waved the question away. Then Shimako-san clasped her hands together, as though she'd just had an idea.

"I've got a 'feeling' I'm going for too."

"Oh, what's that?"

The other two leaned in and inquired. But the answer that Shimako-san met them with was –

"I want it to be fun."

– That.

"Huh?"

"I don't want it to be just a treasure hunt, but, how can I put this . . . I want it to feel more like a video game."

"In what way?"

They surrounded Shimako-san and urged her on, similar to what Yumi and her brother did to their father when he brought home souvenirs.

"Like Yoshino-san, I haven't thought about that yet."

"Oh, okay."

Even though she'd started out by saying it was only a feeling, it was a bit disappointing to hear that the answer would be delayed.

"How about you, Yumi-san?"

"Me?"

Now that the ball was in her court, Yumi considered the topic once more. The other two were the same, in that they didn't know the exact location they wanted, but they had an inkling of an idea.

"I suppose I'd want to go with a 'close to the Yamayurikai' theme."

"What's that mean? Can you explain it a bit more clearly? Like, close in what way?"

"I'm still thinking about that."

The trio folded their arms and sank into silence.

They hadn't thought it would be easy to decide, but instead it looked like it would be quite difficult.

Part 2

At any rate, nothing progressed during the silence.

In accordance with their plan to come up with new ideas by looking at the past (a renaming of their plan to draw inspiration from history), they decided to start by looking at last year's hiding places — the committee meeting board, the old greenhouse, and the library — and their surrounds.

"Still, putting it in the same place two years in a row . . ." Shimako-san smiled as she placed down her rough sketch of the school building's second floor. After tracing over the staff room and adjacent corridor, she finished her sentence with, "Wouldn't work," just as she reached the committee meeting board.

"Well, it was the first place we thought of, so don't you think it'll be the first place everyone checks? This week's Lillian Kawaraban is doing a retrospective of last year's event, so even the second-years that had forgotten about it and the first-years that weren't here for it would go and check those places. Like how criminals always return to the scene of a crime," Yoshino-san said, although her example seemed a bit off. Or maybe it was fitting, if they themselves were considered to be the criminals, since right now they were revisiting the previous locations.

"The board's only about this big. It doesn't take long to look over it," Yoshino-san said while holding up her hands, indicating the size of the board. "So it wouldn't set them back too long to go and check it right at the start. And if they did find it, it'd be like winning the lottery."

"That's true."

So even if they did want to do a double bluff by hiding one in the same place as last year, it wouldn't be on the committee board. With that, the trio decided to move on to the library.

"If we're going to hide one in there, it'd have to be in the reading room."

The library had numerous other rooms, including meeting rooms and archives, but considering the procedures involved in booking these, or the possibility of damage to old books, it made sense to limit the scope of the treasure hunt to the main room. Plus it would be the most familiar location to the majority of students.

"Are you considering the reading room, Yoshino-san?"

"I wasn't, but it would have an abundance of hiding places."

Yoshino-san tidied away the sketch of the school building's second floor and moved the sketch of the library reading room to the center of the table. The plan for the actual event was to draw up a simple map showing the boundaries of the treasure hunt, but for their strategy meeting they wanted to know as much about the areas as possible, so they'd drawn up detailed interior maps ahead of time.

"Last year, Rei-chan hid her card in the non-borrowing section, didn't she? So that nobody could borrow it before the event, right?"

"Yes," Shimako-san said, and nodded in confirmation.

"But what if it was hidden right before the event? Then it wouldn't have to be in the non-borrowing section."

"That won't work."

"Why not? We could get someone else to hide it if you're worried about how conspicuous we would be walking around right before the event."

Yoshino-san then suggested they could ask the first-year Newspaper Club members to do this, as they were event staff that could be seen in the reading room without immediately being connected to the cards.

"Of course, we could ask someone else to hide the card for us. But it's not that. Even during the event, there's the risk that someone could borrow the book that it's hidden in — unless we ask the library to close the lending desk that afternoon."

It looked like these sorts of things had been considered last year, when Rei-sama had decided to hide her card in the library. They wanted to avoid a situation where someone unwittingly borrowed the book during the treasure hunt, or the confusion that would arise if the student on the lending desk discovered the card during the borrowing procedure.

"Ah, I see." Yoshino-san accepted this explanation, "So we can't hide it in one of the borrowable books. Even though there's so many of them."

"But it could be hidden in between two books — we don't have to hide it between the pages of a book, like Rei-sama did."

"Right."

Yoshino-san shot up out of her chair. It looked as though she'd had a flash of inspiration during Shimako-san's advice.

"What is it?"

"I just had a great idea."

As expected.

"How about hiding a tree in a forest?"

"Okay, and?"

The kanji for forest (林) was made from the kanji for tree (木) repeated three times. Given that . . .

"Is there a triple-card place?"

"Stupid. That's not what I'm talking about. In the library, there's drawers with lots of cards, right? They're about the size of a student ID card, with a hole in the bottom, and made out of thick cardboard, with the book name and those strange category identifiers."

"Ah, the card catalogs," Shimako-san informed them.

Nowadays the catalogs and loan tracking were all on the computer, so they

weren't all that familiar with it, but in the past it was apparently what people used to look up books.

"How knowledgeable of you, Shimako-san."

"I spent some time as a library assistant in middle school."

Incidentally, the Lillian's middle-school and high-school shared the same library reading room.

"The card catalogs, huh. It could be an interesting place to use, but . . ."

Yoshino-san raised an eyebrow slightly at Shimako-san's musings. "But?"

"I'm not sure they're the right size." Shimako-san stood up and walked over to a pile of documents, saying, "I think we have one here."

"Ah, a blue card."

"Right. This one is a sample they made last year."

It was only a year ago, but it still felt kind of nostalgic. Last year's head of the newspaper club and editor-in-chief of the Lillian Kawaraban, Tsukiyama Minako-sama, had held this aloft as she explained the rules. Not only was she Mami-san's onee-sama, she was still active in the Newspaper Club.

"See, it's pretty big."

This was probably Yoshino-san's first time seeing one up close, as she took it in her hands and said, "Hmm."

"Right. Although it probably doesn't seem that big from a distance."

Incidentally, Yumi wasn't all that surprised. She had been there when Sachiko-sama's red card had been retrieved after last year's event. So her reaction was along the lines of, "Yep, that's about the size I remember." Folded in half, it was about the size of a paperback novel.

"Then that won't work, no matter how you look at it."

It didn't matter that the card wasn't exactly the same size as the catalog cards, but

if it couldn't fit in the catalog drawer then they couldn't use that as a hiding place. And it probably went without saying that they couldn't fold the card in half again to make it fit.

"We could change the size of the treasure hunt cards," Shimako-san offered, but Yoshino-san flatly rejected this.

"No. There's no way we can do that."

"Why not?"

Why was she so concerned about this?

"Choosing the size of the card to fit the hiding place is absurd, it's putting the cart before the horse. Do you really want to adopt that sort of backwards thinking?"

"I guess not."

Yumi had been thinking, "What's the harm in changing the size of the card?" Wasn't that adapting to the conditions at hand? Would they still be using the same size card decades in the future? Although this was only the second treasure hunt, and they didn't even know if it would be held again next year. Like, even that Robocon that they usually showed on TV over the end-of-year break had a different theme every year. Wouldn't they be better off thinking about it in that light?

"We'll use the same conditions as Rei-chan. I don't want to lose."

"You don't want to lose? To last year's members?"

Yoshino-san would occasionally exhibit some bizarre fixations.

"Retreat is a coward's act," she said, with the face of a samurai.

Part 3

Putting the library reading room on hold, they surveyed the old greenhouse. The final mission in their "rehashing the past" campaign.

"They'll come here too."

Yoshino-san didn't explicitly state who, but she obviously meant the participants.

"Yeah, I'm a bit worried about that."

Yumi gave voice to her thoughts.

"Why?"

The other two turned towards her.

"Last year, the red card was buried beneath the Rosa chinensis plant, right? Going on the theory that the participants will first check the committee noticeboard and the library reading room, then it makes sense that they'll come here too, but. . . ."

Yumi was thinking that it would be a bit worse for this place than the other two.

"I see. We were fortunate last year that not many students thought the card might be buried in the soil, but that won't be the case this year, will it?"

Because of what happened last year, it wouldn't be considered unthinkable this year. So there would probably be a number of students looking to dig up the ground in the old greenhouse.

"Yeah, and that worries me."

It would put a strain on even the hardiest plant to have waves of people digging up and refilling the soil around its roots.

"Then how about we make the old greenhouse out of bounds?"

Yoshino-san frowned slightly.

"That seems like a bit of a cop-out. To put it in Yoshino-san's words, that would be one way of running away."

When Yumi said this, Yoshino-san's eyes suddenly sparkled and she almost bounded over to grab Yumi's hand.

"Such a great friend. You really understand me."

But their other great friend wasn't swayed by this beautiful display of friendship, instead she honestly voiced her concerns.

"But the soil will definitely be dug up if it's included in the treasure hunt. I don't think we should sacrifice the plants in there for the sake of the event."

Environmental care committee members were naturally quite sensitive to the destruction of the environment.

"So we could print warnings in the Lillian Kawaraban. Telling people not to dig up the ground. We could even put it on the entry form."

However –

"People won't read it."

Yoshino-san was insistent, but Shimako-san wasn't about to concede either.

"And even if they do read it, they'll forget all about it as soon as the event starts. As for warning signs, they don't have much effect when they're not right at the spot, so—"

They were all struck by the same thought simultaneously.

"Right at the spot!"

Indeed, right at the spot.

"So it should be okay if we put warning signs right next to the plants."

Warnings that don't have much effect when they're not right at the spot should work when they were right at the spot. Bravo. Correct answer. Well done.

"It's not just *Rosa chinensis*, the old greenhouse probably has *Rosa foetida* and *Rosa gigantea* bushes too."

Yoshino-san wrote a note on the side of the previous map of the martial arts room. "Warning signs at the three riskiest spots in the old greenhouse."

"Besides the greenhouse, there's other dangerous spots where we should leave warning messages too."

"Dangerous? Like the incinerator?"

"There's also the pond near the statue of Maria-sama at the fork in the path."

The pond would be iced over at this time of year, but Shimako-san was worried about people taking it too lightly. Although if it wasn't iced over, people might think the treasure was hidden in the water. The pond wasn't really deep enough to drown in, but it was still dangerous.

"There's probably other places we want to rule in or out that are too small to put on the map too."

The ideas came one after the other as they picked up steam. It hadn't been much of a concern when she'd been a participant, but as an organizer the safety of the students was the number one concern, even to the point of over-protectiveness.

"But doesn't it seem kind of lame if all the notices are just saying, 'Don't go here.'"

As an experiment, they drew small circles on the map where they would put the warning signs, and the map was awash with circles. Deeming this to be excessive, they reviewed the locations and reduced the warnings to about a third of what they had previously.

"What if we sprinkled in some hints to the cards' locations too?" Shimako-san suggested.

"Hints?"

"It might encourage people to read them carefully if there are some hints in there."

Hearing this, Yoshino-san said, "Hmm. I see. A carrot-and-stick approach."

"That wasn't quite how I was thinking about it, but I suppose it's similar."

For instance, if there were some students that were all fired up about digging for treasure, then the signs saying "No Digging Allowed" would kill their enthusiasm. Finding a hint might stop these dejected girls from giving up. It would be a reward instead. So the hint would be the "spoonful of sugar."

"Alright. Since you came up with the idea, they can be hints to the location of your card."

"Huh?"

Yoshino-san ignored Shimako-san's surprise and wrote a note, "White card hints." Yumi also sat there dumbfounded as Yoshino-san simply said, "I told you the theme of my card, right?"

"You want to astonish everyone. You want them to be annoyed."

"Exactly. And if some hints led to my card being found easily, that would just annoy me instead. Or, what? I could put out fake hints, but I don't think that would be okay."

"No, we couldn't do that."

Shimako-san and her strong sense of justice put a stop to that. Fake hints were completely out of the question.

"Then it's decided. How about you, Yumi-san?"

"I'll . . ."

Yumi was stumped. She couldn't picture what the hints would look like even if she wanted to have them.

". . . think about it once I've decided on my hiding spot."

If she came up with a place that would be really hard to find then she'd have some hints, but if she came up with an easy location then she wouldn't.

"Okay. That's fine."

At any rate, picking a location came first. Even though they'd taken a stroll around these outspread maps, no one had settled on their hiding spot just yet.

X-Mark

Part 1

"How about sticking it on the back of a cat? Like in some sort of sling," Yoshino-san suggested.

"See, the cat would run away. It'd get scared with everyone chasing after it. So even if they called out to it or offered it food, it wouldn't come. Plus, the cat could go places they couldn't follow, like under the bushes or into small passages between the school buildings."

As she spoke, she traced a meandering path around the map, highlighting just such a route.

"Wouldn't it be fun to have the card move around?"

Their planning meeting was almost cooked. The gentle boil left only the parts that got stuck to the side and burned, so that adding more water wouldn't help.

"Fun? Are you being serious?" Yumi asked, although whether Yoshino-san was being serious or not didn't change that it was a troublesome idea.

"About half serious."

Half serious.

"What do you think, Shimako-san? Want to go with this?"

And it wasn't even an idea for her own card, but for Shimako-san's. She'd obviously got bored of the idea, but wanted it to be seriously considered for just a little while longer.

"Come on, Yoshino-san, when you said a cat, you meant Lunch, right? You know it would be impossible to catch Lunch, let alone stick something on her."

If she'd given it more thought, Yumi wouldn't have been drawn into this "half

"serious" conversation, but she was feeling exhausted so she didn't just let it pass for Shimako-san to judge.

"Oh, but Shimako-san could do it," Yoshino-san said, with a serious expression. "Merry-san is Sei-sama's cat, so if Sei-sama's petite sœur calls out to her, of course she'll come running."

But Shimako-san looked dubious.

"Goronta isn't my onee-sama's cat, and she doesn't come when I call."

Incidentally, "Lunch," "Merry-san," and "Goronta" were three different names for the one cat.

Yumi had referred to it the way the current second-years typically did, as "Lunch."

Yoshino-san would also call it "Lunch," but due to Rei-sama's influence, she'd called it by the name mainly used by the current third-years, "Merry-san."

Shimako-san used the name "Goronta," which had been used by the previous third-years, now graduated, including Satou Sei-sama.

"Hmm, I guess it won't work then."

The Lunch/Merry-san/Goronta line that Yoshino-san had been tracing on the map came to an abrupt halt when the lead in her mechanical pencil snapped, and she abandoned the effort.

". . . How about some tea?" Yumi proposed.

It was simple, but she thought they could do with a change of pace. They hadn't had anything to drink yet because they didn't want to get the maps wet, but they'd been talking so much her throat was parched, so it seemed like a good time for a short break.

"Sounds good," Shimako-san concurred and started to gather up the maps.

"Is black tea okay?"

The biscuit door opened at about the same time that Yumi stood up.

"Pardon me."

Shimako-san's *sœur*, Noriko-chan, stepped into the room.

"Oh, Noriko-chan's here."

"Mm."

Using her foot as a stopper so the door wouldn't close, Noriko-chan turned around and bent over, her upper body reaching outside the room.

"I searched the first-floor storeroom for the cardboard box we used for the tea party. I thought we could re-purpose it for the 'second-chance draw.'"

As she spoke, she picked something up and brought it inside.

"It wasn't that easy to find though."

But since she was carrying a cardboard box, that meant she'd found it after all. Where could it have been hiding?

"All the spare desks and chairs had been stacked, and a simple cardboard box is light, plus we had no future plans for it, so I thought it would have been casually set aside somewhere. But for some reason I couldn't find it. Even though it was visible, it was like I didn't see it."

After placing the box in the corner of the room, Noriko-chan took a breather. Then, noticing Yumi preparing the tea, she said, "I'll help with that," and bounded over.

"Even though it was visible, it was like you didn't see it. . . ?"

Yoshino-san asked from behind, so Noriko-chan turned around and answered, "Yeah."

"Even though I must have walked past it so many times when I was searching."

Hearing this, Yoshino-san snapped her fingers.

"That's it."

Just like that, the yellow card's hiding place was decided.

"Then it's gotta be here. Sorry for finishing early."

Yoshino-san clicked her mechanical pencil to push some lead out, then forcefully drew an X on their map of the second-floor of the school building, on the exterior wall of the staff room.

Part 2

"So that would mean that Yumi-sama and my onee-sama haven't decided where they'll be hiding their cards?" Noriko-chan asked as they sipped their tea.

"Yeah."

"That's right."

The pair agreed, and then –

"Honestly, aren't you just procrastinating?"

Even though she'd been a partner-in-procrastination until just recently, Yoshino-san's attitude rapidly shifted the moment she made her decision.

"Hmm. Where would I hide it if it were up to me?" Noriko-chan asked herself, as she picked up the stack of maps that had been left on the corner of the table and started leafing through them.

Indeed, this was the sort of situation where it was good to get a younger person's opinion. A fresh breeze could give rise to new ideas. Although there was only a one year difference in their ages.

"We decided to have hints to my card. But that's about all," Shimako-san said.

"Ooh, sounds fun," Noriko-chan chirped.

"R-really?" Shimako-san asked, with a not-entirely-displeased expression. After all, the emotion Shimako-san was aiming for was "fun," so her face immediately brightened when her petite sœur backed her up by saying it "sounds fun." It looked like Shimako-san had been feeling exhausted too. As they explained how they would mix the hints in with warnings, Noriko-chan became more and more excited, firing off a continuous stream of, "Nice," and, "Sounds good."

"The participants are going to be running all over the school looking for the hints. That'll definitely be fun. It'll be like when we played "Human Suguroku" at Rosa Chinensis' house during the New Year break. I wonder if, perversely, people like being given the run-around like that."

When she heard this, Yumi was initially skeptical about that last sentence, but then she remembered how Rei-sama enjoyed being given the run-around by Yoshino-san, and accepted the possibility that it might be true.

"I think it'd be fun to make it a quiz or a crossword, but we should probably stick to something simple this time around. I wouldn't want the hints to lead straight to the card, but there's a lot of ways to accomplish that — like each hint could be a single word, or a single character, so the location would only be found by gathering multiple hints together and arranging them in the proper order."

The fresh breeze had had a tremendous effect. Noriko-chan had disrupted the stale atmosphere and quickly set things flowing in a good direction.

Getting caught up in the moment, Yoshino-san asked, "So where should it be hidden?"

"That's something my onee-sama has to decide. Since it's her card that's being hidden," Noriko-chan grinned.

Part 3

Yumi set out on a stroll with Noriko-chan, borrowing her from Shimako-san for a little while.

That said, their stroll was along the maps in the Rose Mansion parlor. So, strictly speaking, it was not restricted to just the two of them. Like Shimako-san and the white card, Yumi had to decide on a place to hide her red card. That was fundamental. But with a skilled assistant like Noriko-chan by her side, she was 120 percent confident that her latent abilities would awaken and she'd come up with a great idea.

"As much as possible, you all want your hiding places to reflect those different ideas, right?"

"That's right," Yumi agreed. There was a certain leeway because the cards had to be hidden, but it should broadly fit the theme.

"Well, since Yoshino-sama's the only one to have decided on a spot, why don't we use her location as the center and look at places far away from that?"

"Makes sense."

There was a certain rationale behind it. Although it was going back to the "start."

"But the staff room's external wall is a bit of a strange place. It's part of the school building, but it's outside."

"Yeah."

Since it was a bit of a difficult position to pinpoint, they decided to start by looking at places some way away from the staff room.

"Is the school gate in-bounds?"

In one motion, Noriko-chan's pencil made a huge jump alone.

"I don't think it was last year, but . . ." Yumi turned her attention there too, "Mami-san was considering extending the bounds."

The security guard's station was, of course, out-of-bounds, but they wanted to get permission to include the staff parking lot, the tennis courts, and the oval in the game area. The gymnasium and martial arts building would be okay provided they weren't being used on that day, and they were currently in negotiations to ensure this.

"The area around the statue of Maria-sama gets kind of busy on Valentine's Day."

"That's true."

With a lot of, "That place is out," and, "I'm not really sure about that," they eventually made it back to the school building.

"Should we look at the school building too?"

Noriko-chan quickly swapped the maps, adding, "It just has to be away from the staff room. Like, the arts building's a separate building. And the home-ec rooms and science rooms aren't really close to the staff room either."

"Ah, the science rooms are out," Yoshino-san interjected from the side. "Because of the chemicals they keep there. The teachers were worried about that, even though the strong ones are kept in the storage room and the shelves are locked."

But if anything happened, it would be too late. Yumi thought they had made the right call in rejecting it. And since she'd never even considered hiding her card there, she hadn't really cared when it was ruled out.

"Besides that, there's not really any link between me and, say, the music room."

At a stretch, it had been part of her cleaning area as a first-year. But, in that case, Shimako-san was in the same boat.

"Same for the home-ec rooms, nothing really strikes me."

"Then what is a place that strikes you?"

"A place that strikes me?"

"When you think about the school building, is there anywhere other than your classroom that comes to mind? Ignoring the reason why for now."

Noriko-chan lay her pencil down sideways on top of the map and slowly moved it around.

(Is she dowsing?)

– That seemed unlikely, but, at any rate, Yumi did what she was told and tried envisaging the school building, and her attention was quickly drawn towards a certain room.

"The social studies prep room, I guess."

"The social studies prep room?"

Everyone else echoed the name of a room they weren't all that familiar with.

"The social studies prep room . . . why that place?"

Despite saying to ignore the reason why, Rosa Gigantea en bouton now firmly wanted to know the reason.

"Because of the maps."

She put her thoughts into words and Yoshino-san pointed and laughed, "Yumi-san, that's too simple. You're just being influenced by all the maps we have here."

That was an obvious conclusion given the situation, but it was incorrect.

"Not that, the blank maps."

For Yumi, the blank maps were a symbol of Touko-chan. Yumi didn't know whether or not Touko-chan would be participating in the event, but just for a moment she'd wondered where would be a good place to hide the card in order for Touko-chan to find it.

"Blank maps?" Noriko-chan repeated.

". . . Oh, it's nothing. Sorry."

Yumi reconsidered and shook her head.

"Yumi-san?"

"At any rate, the social studies prep room won't work."

"Why not?"

Shimako-san and Yoshino-san looked at her with quizzical expressions.

"I made a mistake."

She couldn't be thinking of someone when she chose her hiding place.

Why hadn't she realized something so obvious before?

"That thing with the social studies prep room?"

Noriko-chan asked for confirmation, and Yumi nodded vigorously.

That was it.

She wanted a hiding place that didn't favor any specific person, so that students with no inside knowledge of her would be totally fine.

"Alright, let's think of some other place. Anything you're particular about, or have an image of?"



Noriko-chan switched to asking her questions, probably because they hadn't been having any success with their previous approach.

"That reminds me," Shimako-san started, "Your theme was 'close to the Yamayurikai,' wasn't it?"

"Ah."

"That's right."

The second-years had completely forgotten about that until now, even though it was supposed to be the most important consideration. This time, Yumi was struck by something.

"How about the Rose Mansion?"

"That's it!" Yoshino-san said, and snapped her fingers again.

"Indeed — it's hard to see what's right under your nose, right?"

Shimako-san placed the stack of maps in front of Yumi. There, she drew an X with her pencil.

Even though they were in that spot right now.

It was a bit of a strange feeling.

Part 4

That left Shimako-san's hiding place.

While they'd decided the minor matter of having hints to its location, the location itself still hadn't been decided.

There had been a couple of candidates, but none of them had stood out as being fun, nor had she chanced upon somewhere good.

"Thinking back," Shimako-san said, as she traced her finger over a map, "Earlier, you were talking about attaching it to Goronta's back, right Yoshino-san? We quickly dismissed that idea, but I think there's plenty we could take from it as reference."

When she heard this, Yumi asked, "Like what?" Not to be rude, but she had no idea how Shimako-san could use anything from that idea as a reference.

"I think it'd be kind of fun if the card moved around."

"Then how about sticking it on the back of a teacher?"

Shimako-san forced a smile when Yoshino-san proposed this time-honored prank.

"But we wouldn't be able to do that without asking. And we'd have to ask them to stay within the bounds for the duration of the treasure hunt. It would be difficult."

"Then what? How are you going to use Merry-san as a reference?"

Quick-tempered Yoshino-san's self-satisfaction soon turned to irritation, but gentle Shimako-san was not perturbed by that sort of thing.

"Having the card itself move around might break the rules. But what if the

environment around it changed over time, wouldn't that sort of trick be good?"

"The environment around it would change over time?"

"Yes," Shimako-san nodded, "Like the way the coastline at the beach changes between low tide and high tide. I was thinking it might be possible to do something like that."

"So it would be hidden at high tide, but visible at low tide?"

"Exactly."

Meaning it would be like gathering shells at low tide. But they weren't at the beach, and Yumi couldn't think of a similar system that would happen at an old Tokyo girls' school.

Of course, if it were possible, it would be quite fun.

Yumi was getting excited, although not to the level of Noriko-chan.

"In general, it's funny how things change at this time of day, isn't it?" Shimako-san looked at the clock and the other three were drawn in too.

4:40 p.m. The event's end time.

It would be growing dark outside the window. They'd been going back and forth over the maps for an hour.

"My, I'm surprised by your evil side, Shimako-san," Yoshino-san grinned, as she pointed this out, adopting the standard expression of conspiring villains in an Edo-period drama.

"Oh?"

Naturally, Shimako-san didn't respond in kind. In her place, Noriko-chan attacked the villain.

"What part of my onee-sama are you calling evil, huh?"

She would have been better off ignoring this frivolous chatter from her senior. Although it was cute the way she took it seriously and bared her fangs.

Well, it probably wasn't the sort of comment that someone who loved their onee-sama could let slide.

"Because, if we go on the premise that the game ends with the white card still hidden, then the joke's on the participants."

". . . You're right."

Shimako-san agreed, throwing away Noriko-chan's efforts to protect her. Gently laughing as she said, "I guess you would have to call that evil."

"What?"

Even so, Noriko-chan was still unable to accept it, and kept protesting seriously for quite some time.

"Well, Yoshino-san said it was a surprise, so don't you think that's fine?"

It wasn't until her onee-sama said this that Noriko-chan finally faltered.

"I think we've reached the end, so why don't we call it a night here?"

"Yeah."

"Sounds good."

They'd already decided plenty, so if they had another think about it at lunch tomorrow they'd be all set for their meeting with the newspaper club.

"What would you say to going out for a little preview?" Shimako-san asked.

"Do you mean walking around and looking at the actual location?"

Yumi couldn't think of anything else Shimako-san would have meant by a preview, but her mind had been dulled by all the virtual touring they'd been doing.

"Yes, on our way home. It's the perfect time for it too."

From that, it sounded like Shimako-san already had a location in mind.

"I'll go."

"Me too."

"Lead on."

With that, they quickly finished up — gathering all the maps into a large manila envelope, cleaning the teacups, and checking that the windows were closed. When the tidy-up was complete, they excitedly lined up in front of Shimako-san in their coats.

"Like a group of children lining up about to go on an excursion," Shimako-san giggled.

Yumi had to hand it to Shimako-san and her way with words. Because, right now, their excitement was plain to see.

"Well, let's go."

Rosa Gigantea and the three boutons left the Rose Mansion with a spring in their step.

The reality of the cold air sunk deep into their bodies, but their hearts were hot with excitement.

Where on the map was Shimako-san going to draw her X?

They'd have to wait just a little while longer to find out.

Afterword

– Sorry about the many things that you'll have to wait for.

Hello, this is Konno.

What did I mean by that?

After reading the first section, "Criss-Cross," you'll probably be left wondering, "What happens next?"

You may think this will be settled in the next section, "Map Stroll," but you'd be wrong because this actually takes place a bit earlier, so doesn't resolve anything at all.

Leaving open the question of what happened to that card.

In the end, you'll have to wait for the next volume.

But, I don't think it's all that bad to have to wait for things, from time to time.

Like having to wait for the next issue of a magazine to get the solution to a puzzle. Without the ability to easily check the answer, you can settle in and challenge yourself.

Spoiler Alert – this section contains spoilers for this volume.

On top of that.

The white card's location has been held in reserve until the next volume too.

Of the seven hints, six were revealed in the text.

In this sense you're in the same position as Sachiko, although you didn't get the hints in the same way, so it's hard to say whether you're at an advantage or a disadvantage.

So, for those who have the spare time and inclination, please give it some thought.

As usual, this is not a solicitation, but if you solve it like Tanuma Chisato by saying nonsense phrases, or you write it down on the corner of a piece of paper, as usual, I'll be happy (and just that).

End of Spoilers

Now then, on a different tangent.

For those that read the afterword before the book, this next bit isn't related to the story.

Regarding the stray cat living at school that they talked about during "Map Stroll" (Goronta/Merry-san/Lunch), she (for she is a female cat) is based on a model. That said, it wasn't just one cat. Just like she has many names, she also has many models.

As you may have expected, there was a stray that had settled down at the high-school I attended. From that cat I borrowed her pattern of showing up at lunch time and taking the left-over food. The different grades and classes all had different designations for this cat – I was told by one of my classmates that its name was "Bun."

Goronta and Merry-san. These are one cat. The actual namesake was a cat in my neighborhood. This is a pretty old story, though. I don't know whether it was someone's pet cat or a stray, but we'd see it around every now and again and it was quite well known in the neighborhood. But a cat can't introduce itself and we didn't know the owner, so we didn't know the cat's real name. The ladies of

the neighborhood took to calling it whatever they liked. One day, when seeing a cat come walking along, one of them called out, "Merry-san." Another lady that she'd been chatting to corrected her, saying, "Oh, isn't that Goronta?" I don't know which one was right and which was wrong, or if it mattered in either case, but when I heard that I laughed at the discrepancy between the two names. Because, on one hand you've got Merry-san (and -san was part of the name), and on the other you've got Goronta! It was too funny, so I immediately wanted to put it in a story.

When I was a child, a cat was attacked by crows. This episode actually happened to my friend's cat. When I heard the story (obviously, from the cat's owner), that the crows had had been eating the cat, I was incredibly shocked. That cat was lucky to get rescued by a human and become a pet cat. Even so, I thought it must have been terrified.

Her outward appearance, a blackish tabby cat, is from a kitten that stumbled into my garden a long time ago. For two or three days it wandered around the neighborhood, meowing as it went, but it quickly disappeared. It called out to many people, so maybe it was taken in by someone. Or maybe it turned into a proper stray, and moved on to a different territory. I hope it wasn't attacked by crows. But to be on its own when it was so small. It must have been tough. That's the life of a stray cat.

The combination of these cats, and many others, went into the making of Goronta/Lunch/Merry-san. I'm sure her conduct from here on will continue to be a reflection of many different cats too.

I don't own a cat, but I've got plenty of friends and acquaintances that do, so I'm not about to run out of material (thankfully).

– Ah, but you shouldn't keep a cat waiting too long.

Konno Oyuki.